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2005

LOW FIDELITY:

STEREOTYPED BLACKNESS IN THE FIELD OF SOUND

by

Mendi Dessalines Shirley Lewis Townsend Obadike

Graduate Program in Literature
Duke University

Date: April 4, 2005

Approved:

Houston A. Baker, Jr., Supervisor

Wahneema Lubiano, Supervisor

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Program of Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation explores the construction of sonic stereotypes in film and audio recordings and the implications of these stereotypes for literature. Mentions of sound in contemporary discourse on stereotype are brief and disconnected departures from theorizations of the visual field, which is imagined as the site where race and racism *happen*. This project is shaped by three questions regarding sonic stereotype: 1. Why are the critical tools for recognizing visual stereotypes highly developed, while the tools for discussing sonic stereotypes are almost non-existent? 2. Why do theorists who write about the social meanings of music often explore the cultural pleasures of the sounds they consider, but not the moments where the common readings of sounds are damaging, dehumanizing, reductive? 3. How can the conversations about stereotype that are so often cast in solely visual terms be expanded by what is known about habits of listening and social meanings of sound?

In the first chapter I address the question of the visual nature of the discourse on stereotype. I demonstrate the ways in which stereotype is characterized as a visual problem; I also discuss the moments in their

arguments where the visual is pushed aside and room is made for a consideration of other forms of stereotype, sound among them. In the next chapter, I provide the terminology for reading sonic stereotypes of blackness. In the course of providing new terminology I demonstrate why critical attention to the (social) meanings of sounds is so often focused on aesthetics rather than stereotype.

In the remaining chapters, I offer readings of narratives for which the representations of a mythic blackness depend on sound for the meaning to be made. In the third chapter I read the use of music in the soundtrack and score to *Boiler Room*, a film in which there are almost no black characters but the musical choices reference black people. The final chapter considers the ways in which two contemporary black artists (audio artist Pamela Z and poet Cornelius Eady) explore sonic representations of blackness as a mode through which to explore and explode sonic stereotypes.

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An Introduction

Sound carries meaning.

Understanding the ways in which sound carries meaning requires a complicated understanding of textual narrative, for the meaning that sound carries does not reside in the sound itself. In every text that depends on sound as the medium for the message, the very fact that the message is conveyed through sound carries part of the message. When Marshall McLuhan argued that "the medium is the message", his emphasis was on the technologies of media and audiences' typical responses to them. Television was "hot"; newspaper was "cold"; messages for either medium had to be tempered by the temperature of the technology at hand.

When I write that the medium of sound carries meaning, I mean to invoke McLuhan's sense of "medium" as

a technology or set of technologies, but I also mean to invoke a notion of "medium" as a way of communicating, a way that brings with it a distinct set of qualities that can be engaged by a number of unifying (listening) practices. We can become aware of listening practices and sound qualities by attending to the technologies through which we sometimes encounter them - radio, TV, film, telephones - but we must also be aware that our person-to-person interactions are also mediated by these practices and qualities for reading the meanings of sound.

Each of the different ways we can encounter sound has its own distinct practices and qualities. Within the way that is the medium of sound, then, there are many ways - radio's sound from an unseen source, television's sound from an image in a box, film's surround sound with a larger-than-life image on a screen, and the telephone's sound from an unseen source with an intimate connection to the listener. Of course, these are only a few of the myriad ways in which we experience messages through sound. Because sound's way is in fact many ways, the messages told through sound are linked to each other as much by our practices for engaging with sound as they

are by the sounds themselves. This is to say that the sound we hear on the telephone and the sound we hear on the radio in a given moment are as linked by the ways that we attend to stories and identify animated voices as they are by the fact that each message is being conveyed through what we call "sound".

As such, the interpretations we make of the messages carried in sound are also linked to messages carried in other media when those messages invoke the practices and qualities we associate with sound. Reading about listening to a story may not be the same as listening to a story, but our abilities to comprehend narratives that invoke sound do depend on our ability, albeit most often unconscious, to read the meaning that a sound carries. The difficulty of explaining the connection between an act of listening that is required in order to understand an idea in a narrative and an act of thinking about listening that is required in order to understand an idea in a narrative is compounded by the fact that I am writing about listening and you are thinking about listening.

The comedian Steve Martin once said "Talking about music is like dancing about architecture" (in Anderson).

Every time I think about this idea it strikes me, not just because it underscores the difficulty of my task, but also because the meaning of the statement undoes itself. In the first moment of contemplation, the sentence seems to teach that talking about music is ridiculous. Perhaps the main reason this interpretation is first to come to mind is that the difficulty, if not impossibility, of using words to say something meaningful about music is a common sentiment. If so, however, it is also that the idea of dancing about architecture is meant to produce laughter.

In any case, just as I begin to accept the proposition that to dance about architecture (and by extension, talk about music) would be ridiculous, I start to see myself whirling in space. I imagine trying to communicate through movement the dimensions of a room, its walls, floors, arches, and domes. I even imagine myself succeeding at this task. More importantly, something about dance makes me think of saying more with it that I would think to say with words about architecture. In figuring out how to move my body in order to communicate—in what rhythms, speeds, and shapes—I would have to contemplate whether I felt safe

or in danger in the space, whether I felt cramped or liberated in it, alienated or at home, lonely, comforted, unnerved, warm, or cold. In other words, what I imagine myself communicating about architecture through dance is not just the structure of a room, but a relationship to that structure. Whether these concerns come to be because I associate dance with relationships to structures of whether my mind goes in these directions because of my lack of familiarity with an insider's language of dance or architecture, the challenge gives me more ambitious goals for communication.

The very idea that has been presented to discourage an attempt to talk about music ends up portraying the breadth of the possibilities in doing so. What makes this translation across media possible? To dance about architecture, to use any form that is not typically used to communicate about a thing, one might of necessity begin to answer a set of questions not typically asked about that thing, or not typically asked first. There is something about stepping out of boundaries with the language used to communicate that creates a broader

field of discussion and a new direction to the discussion, a new order.

The need to address not only structure but also a relationship to it comes from an attempt to come back around to what dance movement lacks that words enable. It is the difficulty of imagining a way to communicate details such as materials, age, and sturdiness that pushes me to imagine feeling safe or cramped or warm or alienated. Because I know of no dance move that automatically communicates 'wood' before I imagine this process, for example, I have to first consider what I associate with the material: warmth, coziness, happiness, and then stiffness and pliability. If there is a way to communicate these sensations associated with material, perhaps there is a way to move from them towards material. Translation is possible because differing contexts sometimes parallel one another. It is important to remember, however, that though a word in one language may have a parallel counterpart in another context, the second word may have a context that does not exist for the first.

"Context", here, is both a word's denotative meanings within a shared language and an individual

experience with the word in life. For an example of the first kind of context, the Spanish word "muñeca" can be translated to mean "wrist" in English. In this sense, "muñeca" and "wrist" are parallel. However, "muñeca" can also be translated to mean "doll". Because the English "wrist" does not have a relationship with the English "doll", its relationship to the word "muñeca" is not a perfect fit. The extent to which two language contexts are not parallel becomes most apparent in humor and poetry, where double entendre often plays a crucial role. For an example of the second type of context, the Spanish "queso" can be translated to mean "cheese" in English. Because I have usually used the word "cheese" in the United States, my experience of cheese is usually cold (Cheddar, Gouda, Port Salut, etc.), with the exception of hot mozzarella on pizza. Most of my experience of the term "queso", however, took place when I lived in the Dominican Republic. There, when I ate "queso", it was a hot food, fried, to be eaten with 'grasa y aguacate' (grease [or gravy] and avocado). Many people may experience of "queso" and "cheese" as the same thing, either because they live in bilingual worlds or because their eating experiences are different from

mine. For me, however, the world "cheese" simply does not seem to be the right word to use when I want to tell someone about my experience of eating "queso frito". The idea that context may alter the parallelism of words that are counterparts in some contexts is especially true for movement across media. While ideas and sensations that can be conveyed through one medium may also be approached through another, there are often factors that make exact translation impossible.

Our aim has to be to move towards details not easily accessible in new media in such a way that the new medium opens up directions for extended discussions without necessarily pointing to a solution. It is also important to note, however, that the possibility of translation across media depends upon the possibility of communication about a thing through an originary medium. The operative part of speech in the sentence in question may be the preposition. The idea that it is possible to do anything 'about' music or architecture establishes the idea that one could possibly do something else 'about' those artforms. In some ways, the most abstract concept in the sentence preceding this writing is the way the word 'about' establishes a structure for

reference. 'About' initiates several questions. First, 'about' introduces the possibility for 'not about'. For example, one could put on a performance 'about' the architecture of a building and a member of an audience could say, That performance wasn't about architecture at all, that was about Olly Wilson's relationship to Negro Spirituals. On the other hand, the possibility of disagreement over accuracy in one thing being 'about' another is not limited to translation from one (more suitable) medium to another, less common medium for communication. It is just as possible that a reader of an article 'about' architecture could make the comment, That article wasn't about architecture at all, that was about nostalgia for the Old West. While 'about' introduces the possibility of a failure to do something, it also sets up a structure for relation.

To do something, to act in some way 'about' something else is to present a way to understand that thing. This way is necessarily oblique. There is a lack of precision that is the strength of 'aboutness'. To dance about architecture is to present some way of experiencing architecture or reading it, but only one way. If we can write about architecture, experience it

that way, then we have a precedent. By experiencing what we know about architecture through the act of writing about it, for example, we create a point of reference that can be expanded upon through another way of experiencing (such as dancing).

This brings me to my topic. I am writing about sound, which is not the same as talking about music. For one, there is a difference between the relationship of talking to music and that of writing to sound. Talking and music are both ways of using sound, just as dance and architecture are both responses to space. Perhaps there are ideas or sensations that can be communicated with music that cannot be translated precisely into talking, and vice versa. Because talking and music can both be understood as uses of or responses to sound, however, talking may enable one to make a negative comment on music. One could use talking to demonstrate ways in which music does not use sound. Likewise, one could use dancing to demonstrate what architecture does not to do space.

To use writing to comment on sound, however, is to be a step removed from that other process. First, to use the paradigm above, writing can be readily understood as

a way of using what can be seen, while sound is mostly understood as using something that can be heard. Although negation is still possible as a way of making meaning - one could use writing to represent ways in which sound does not "use what is seen" - the kinds of things "writing" and "sound" are do not make for a parallel structure in their relationships to "using what can be seen". Secondly, while it may be possible to align writing with talking or dancing because they can all be understood as ways of communicating, sound does not match up with music and architecture. Music and architecture are both humanly created responses to what can be sensed, sound is something that can be sensed (heard) outside of a human need to create art or communicate.

The kind of translation that readers are required to do as they engage invocations of sound still depends upon relationships that exist between different contexts. However, these relationships might be described as perpendicular, rather than parallel. When I argue in writing about the invocation of sound in written texts, I know that the extent to which my readers understand and agree is dependent upon the

extent to which they can tap into the sound-banks of their memories. Either the memories of sounds are there or they are not. While my manipulation of the visual field is meant to trigger these memories, I cannot introduce new sounds through print. While writing about sound has this obstacle, it is a potentially productive obstacle to have. Because the inability to make sound in writing creates a distance from sound, it can also provoke reflection in the way that the challenge to dance about architecture might do. Without the immediacy of envelopment in sound as the carrier for my argument about sound, the kind of thinking about sound that is produced is one that necessarily requires engaging with memory and discourse. What I can do through writing about sound, perhaps better than I might do through talking or playing music, is direct attention to the function of memory and the role of discourse in the act of understanding the meanings of sound.

Discourse of Stereotyped Blackness in Sound

To understand that sounds and invocations of sounds carry meanings is to open a door to an entire field of

representation that is severely under-theorized when compared with that of images. This project argues for a way of reading representation that complicates our notions of stereotyped blackness by expanding the field of representation in which stereotypes are recognized from images to sound. At present, when a narrative does not have images or when the images are not representing stereotypes, it is difficult to recognize that sounds are often doing the work of stereotype. Although much of the work on visual stereotypes applies to sonic stereotypes, sounds function differently from images in narratives. A lengthy study of sonic stereotypes will enable readers to recognize the parts of stereotype that are particular to sonic representations. This critical investigation of stereotype as a sonic problem will also expand the concept of stereotype, which will not only help us recognize when and how narratives plunge into stereotype, but also when and how to talk back to and / or subvert stereotypes.

SONIC BLACKNESS

There is a symbolic economy in American narratives in which references to and through "blackness" function as signs for "difference". The "blackness" to which I refer is elusive; at times a sign of "blackness" is as concrete as the color of someone's skin and at times it is an idea that comes to reference black people through repeated association. This sign is most often recognized when it is visual, but it can also be deployed through sounds. I have come to distinguish the "blackness" of such a sign system from other references to "blackness" that do not depend on the reduction of individual character to type or use references to black people to mark out the territory of the obscene "mythic blackness". Because it functions mostly to provide a contrast to whiteness, the blackness that is mythic blackness does not even need the presence of black people to be referenced.

James Snead, whose writing on race and film was collected in the remarkable posthumous collection *White Screens / Black Images*, offers useful insight on stereotype as a kind of narrative code through which an idea of blackness emerges that is distinct from the lives of black people. According to Snead, each

stereotype of blackness is linked to the others and together they form "larger complexes of symbols and connotations" and codes that "then begin to form a kind of 'private conversation' among themselves without needing to refer back to the real world for their facticity" (141). Snead finds these narrative codes for blackness that do not need to "refer back to the real world" in the form of three conventions: omissions, marking (where blackness manifests in any contrast from a white norm), and mythification.

"Mythification," Snead writes, "is the replacement of history with a surrogate ideology of elevation or demotion along a scale of human value" (4). He also notes that mythification requires "a pool of spectators ready to accept and identify themselves with film's tailor-made versions of reality". The modern myths created in Hollywood films provide an ideology by keeping signs in conversation with each other and by giving spectators the opportunity to identify with what is elevated or what is demoted by the narrative's code. Snead, who reads against Claude Lévi-Strauss' idea that myths unify communities, argues that because modern myths invite audiences to recognize and identify with

the elevated or demoted identity, they "illustrate social divisions" (4, the emphasis is Snead's).

The mythic blackness of which I write is one in which the contrast in social divisions is heightened so as to emphasize a symbolic function. The sign's vehicles (in this case, images and sounds) are abstracted from their original contexts in such a way as to obscure the conditions under which they were produced. Most important in the representation of mythic blackness is the emotional response this representation can provoke in the audience. Mythic blackness surfaces often (but not always) when the links between a sign vehicle and its object are synecdochic. The link LeRoi Jones makes between the sound of James Brown's band (as a sign vehicle) and all of Black America (as the sign's ultimate object—what philosopher Charles Peirce would call its interpretant) depends upon taking a part (Brown's band) for a whole (Black America). However, the sign gains its meaning from Jones' sense that the (cultural) blackness that some listeners associate with the sound of James Brown's band is a product of a relationship between the band and Black America. In this case, the meaning of the sign Jones recognizes depends

upon the part (Brown's band) being indistinguishable in character and circumstance from the whole (Black America).

When the blackness referenced is a mythic blackness, however, the relationship between the part of the sign that signifies and the larger idea that functions as the sign's ultimate object is obscured. One thing that makes it difficult to distinguish between cultural blackness and mythic blackness, however, is the fact that the sign vehicles that reference cultural blackness and mythic blackness may be the same. The difference between the objects of signs, when referenced and acknowledged as black, has more to do with the function of the sign than with the sign's vehicle. It is also difficult to distinguish between cultural blackness and mythic blackness because in many moments the idea of what it is to be culturally black is formed against the myth. One can read this problem through the following statement by LeRoi Jones: "The world James Brown's images power is the lowest placement (the most alien) in the white American social order. Therefore, it is the Blackest and potentially the strongest" (186).

Although Jones' larger argument is about black culture and the place of black music in black culture, the debased status of actual black people in the white American social order gives the music a mythic function in this moment of the argument - it is a sign of the alien and therefore it is a sign of strength. For a moment, black music in general and James Brown's music in particular lose their relationship to black people and become reduced to the role they play both in and against another social order. In this kind of moment, where the blackness referenced is mythic, the sign becomes a stereotype.

If part of what makes it difficult to recognize the mythic function of the blackness represented in this moment is the fact that it is referenced in a discussion about culture, another crucial part of the difficulty is the fact that the sign Jones invokes is a sonic sign. Both the discourse on blackness and the discourse on stereotype take a particularly visual character. In addition to this problem, the discourse on black sound is mostly a conversation about aesthetic traditions. As such, it is difficult to identify the references to mythic blackness when they are made in sound, when the

stereotype is a sonic stereotype. I write this work in an effort to answer three questions that arise from the difficulty of recognizing sonic stereotype:

(1) Why is it that the critical tools with which audiences discuss stereotypes - reductions of character to raced types - are highly developed when the language of these reductions is visual, while the tools for discussing these same phenomena in audio are almost non-existent?

(2) Why is it that theorists who write about the social meanings of music and sound design so often explore the cultural pleasures of the sounds they consider, but not the wounds, the moments where the common readings of sounds are damaging, dehumanizing, reductive?

(3) Finally, how can those conversations about damaging, dehumanizing reductions of character that are so often cast in solely visual terms be expanded by what is known about habits of listening and social meanings of sound?"

I answer the first question in the following chapter - "Mythic Blackness & The Eye (Or, The Invisible Work of Sonic Stereotypes)" - which is a reconsideration of the

visual nature of the discourse on stereotype, with focused attention on Franz Fanon's seminal essay "The Fact of Blackness" and its critical descendants. In this chapter I not only demonstrate the ways in which stereotype is characterized as a visual problem by theorists, I also discuss the moments in their arguments where the visual is pushed aside and room is made for a consideration of other forms of stereotype, sound among them. These moments open the door for a critical consideration of sound in the discourse on stereotype. In the next chapter, "Sound, Stereotype, and the Office of the Ear", I provide the terminology for reading sonic stereotypes of blackness. These terms are derived from the answers to question two, which concerns the reasons why critical attention to the meanings of sounds is so often focused on aesthetics (the home of the good and the beautiful) rather than stereotype (the home of the bad and ugly).

In the remaining chapters, I offer readings of narratives for which the representations of a mythic blackness depend on sound for the meaning to be made. In the third chapter "Is The Audience Listening?: Acousmatic Blackness in *Boiler Room*", I read the use of

music in the soundtrack and score to the film *Boiler Room*, a film in which there are almost no black characters but the musical choices reference black people. Because of the structure of this film, the reader can recognize the ways in which sounds can carry reference to a mythic blackness that functions as a carrier for other ideas. The final chapter - "There's A Crack in Our Voice: Speaking through Sonic Stereotypes" - considers the ways in which two contemporary black artists explore sonic representations of blackness as a mode through which to explore and explode sonic stereotypes. I discuss the use of the idea of a black voice as a palate for prominent avant-garde audio artist Pamela Z and the ways in which blackness figures as both noise and silence in the Pulitzer Prize nominated poet and playwright Cornelius Eady. I conclude the project with a close reading of a scene from Nella Larsen's *Passing*. My reading is in conversation with the questions I take up in each chapter regarding, sound, stereotype, and difficulty of representing race, but it also suggests new directions for my study and for media studies readings of print literature. The issue of sound

in print literature also brings to light a challenge in my own writing of on sound.

Mythic Blackness & The Eye

(Or, The Invisible Work of Sonic Stereotypes)

Stereotype takes its name from a printing process from the late eighteenth century in which images are created from a mold. Each reproduction is identical to the mold. As Sander Gilman writes in the introduction to his book *Difference and Pathology*, the term "stereotyped expression" came into use in the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century psychologists began to use the term "stereotype" to refer the "images through which we categorize the world" (15, 16). In more recent times, the concept has come to reflect the sense of repetition associated with stereotypes, but the image and acts of looking continue to play a large role in the connotation of the term "stereotype".

One highly influential strain of contemporary thinking on stereotype is that which converses with critical interventions by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks*. Sander Gilman ("What Are Stereotypes and Why Use Texts to Study Them?"), Homi Bhabha ("The Other Question"), and Stuart Hall ("The Afterlife of Frantz

Fanon") turn to Fanon in the process of thinking about race and representation. Each thinks about blackness in particular, but also Otherness in colonial contexts. Each also depends on his visual logic to think about the nature and proliferation of stereotypes. To open my discussion on the ways in which stereotype has been characterized as a problem of the visual realm, I present the visual arguments of Fanon's "The Fact of Blackness" and the responses of Sander Gilman, Homi Bhabha, and Stuart Hall.

Blackness as a Visual Fact

In "The Fact of Blackness," Frantz Fanon explores blackness as a character revealed through acts of looking and being watched. Fanon takes the reader through several experiences in which the appearance of his body causes a watcher to draw conclusions about his character. He then explains the logic of these conclusions in order to make an argument about the nature of blackness, not as a cultural or visual phenomenon, but rather, as a mythical quality attached to the body.

The chapter begins: "'Dirty nigger!' Or simply, 'Look, a Negro!'" These first words of "The Fact of Blackness" draw our attention to a gaze. Throughout the discussion of what it means to understand one's self as Black, as a Negro, Fanon threads the fragments of a story about being seen. In the first case he is seen as a "nigger" (a black person, the interpretant of which is a dirty, hated, hateful thing). In the second case he is seen as a "Negro" (a black person whose interpretant is left if not open, then unmarked.) However, evidence of this recognition is only knowable through the sound of a voice, a child's voice.

A child's voice says: "'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!'" Fanon continues: "Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible" (112). In response to the repeated phrase, "Look, a Negro!" and the information that the speaker is frightened, we can begin to imagine all sorts of other details about the context of the statement: the size and color of the speaker, the size and color of the man of which he speaks. However, there are also questions about what seem to be the less pertinent details: Where are

these three people? In a train station? In a park? It is crowded or isolated? Is it a warm, sunny day? Is it snowing?

Some of this information is provided by Fanon:

> My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, **recolored**, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, it's cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage . . . (113, 114).

In that passage, we move from a list of interpretants that result from the idea of the Negro to a seemingly small piece of information, "it's cold". This

information, however small, is vital. What causes fear in the little boy? Would the man ever have learned this fact of his blackness if not for the **combination** of his black skin and his shivering in the cold? It is hard to know the answers to these questions and this subtlety is exactly what ambience lends to the interpretation of life and narrative.

In one sense, ambience is simply the background, those parts of a scene to which we are not to be attentive. Most definitions of ambience focus on the sense that ambience is met with inattention. However, a 1956 definition of the term from *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* holds a part of meaning that may still resonate today. There, ambience is defined as "the configuration of secondary designs [and] themes . . . enhancing the central designs and themes" of a narrative. While this definition still characterizes ambience as secondary, the no longer recognized element of *design* highlights the structure and detail of the ambience of a scene. In some ways, the ambience of the story Franz Fanon tells could be understand as the elements of weather, the location, the time of day of the incident. In other ways, it has to do with what he calls an

"historico-racial schema", the elements of which are given him by "the white man, who had woven [him] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (111). These details, iconic in their flat, repeated, recognizable meanings, create not only the idea of blackness, but also the ambience through which blackness is perceived.

Such iconic representations frequently rely on ambience for their meanings. Consider the two magazine covers of June 27, 1994 that featured the image of OJ Simpson. Both were alterations of the police file mug shot. In one, the *Newsweek* cover, the top of the photograph was cut off. The fact that the top of Simpson's head is cropped gives the sense that he is subjected to a controlling gaze. He is no longer in control of his own image. The other image - the *Time* magazine cover - darkened the image *so as to make Simpson look more sinister.*

While on one hand the alteration is not surprising (because it was common knowledge that in the visual language of the dominant culture a dark countenance already signified a sinister character in the minds of many people), the *process* of darkening called to my attention a curious phenomenon. If a dark face equaled

danger, then why did Simpson's black face need to be made darker? Was there something about his fame that had lightened him in the public (read: white) eye? Or is this a process to which any of us would be subjected, given the need to make us appear (more) evil?

While the *Time* magazine cover was still being heavily discussed, there was another magazine cover that called some of us to attention. The cover of the November/December 1995 issue of *Ms. Magazine* promised redefinitions of women's sensuality and pleasure and tales of 'hot unscripted sex' in red and hot pink lettering against a black and white photograph of a dark, heavily moisturized women's face. Many black women began to question the timing and reasoning behind this choice. Why did *Ms.* choose to use the image of a black woman for the cover in this moment? Why was a black women used to represent sexuality when black women so rarely represented other issues shared among women on the cover of this magazine?

I struggled with my discomfort over this cover because on the one hand, I was concerned about the hyper-visibility of black women's sexuality in the media. On the other hand, I didn't want to suggest that we should

not have access to representations of black women and pleasure. What is most useful to me about the conversation about the cover, however, is the additional information provided by Marcia Gillespie (the editor of *Ms.* and a black woman) at Duke University's The Body Politic conference that occurred within the next year. Gillespie stated that *Ms.* had received many letters chiding them about using the image of a black woman to represent sensuality. She reported that in spite of the appearance, the model on the cover was not a black woman. The model was a white woman whose image had been darkened. With that knowledge, my suspicions about what was being said with signifiers associated with blackness were confirmed: Although the woman photographed was white, the signifiers pointed to a black woman's face and *that* combination pointed to the sense of "sensuality".

In other words, it was not even necessary to use an actual black person to get the effect of the index; "sensuality" emerged as the ultimate object of the image of darkness. The blackness could be sculpted with ambience, with lighting and a tight shot, and its interpretant would be absolutely clear. This kind of *intelligibility* of blackness as a sign that is both fixed

(because sign vehicles that reference black presence can be used to stabilize the meaning of the sign) and floating (because "black" sign vehicles can be used to reference many different - sometimes competing - meanings) is exactly the issue that Fanon explores in "The Fact of Blackness". Fanon writes: "I am being dissected beneath white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*". The word "real" in the statement above is operative. Real eyes (in this case) are those that are in the position to fix, say, a black person (in the manner of *Time* and *Ms.*) in his or her place, or to affix to any person a dark skin. Contemporary writers on stereotype continue to wrestle with a position of being 'fixed' in place.

Because the fixed body in Fanon's text is held by a gaze, critics who deal with his work also engage the visual aspect of stereotyping, the idea of the black body as visually fixed (for dissection) "beneath white eyes". Subsequent definitions of stereotype by Hall, Gilman, and Bhabha are all framed precisely by this visual discourse. But there is room in each of their essays on representation to imagine another formulation, a related frame of reading - sonic stereotypes. This room mostly

takes the form of "excess". It exceeds to the visual logic that is constructed as primary and provides structure for expanded thinking on stereotype. Before we get to this "room" for sound, however, let us look at the visual slant of writing on stereotype by Fanon's critical descendants.

In an essay entitled "The Spectacle of the Other" Stuart Hall defines stereotype as a "racialized regime of representation" in which cultural difference is naturalized to such an extent that "biology" is perceived as "destiny" (245). Hall writes of stereotype as a process by which blacks are "*reduced to their essence*. Laziness, simple fidelity, mindless 'cooning', trickery, childishness [belong] to blacks *as a race, as a species*".[1] Such stereotypes are ways in which meanings of raced signs (which can be interpreted in many ways) are fixed. Black people are reduced to physical differences from white subjects, such as "thick lips, fuzzy hair, broad face," Hall writes, which are then fragmented, distorted, and generalized (258).

Hall finds it important to note that stereotypes occur when there are "gross inequalities of power" (258).

Following the caution of the French theorist Jacques Derrida, he notes that the difference is never simply a case of two distinct but equal types. Stereotype is, rather, a case in which the power of one group—the one with "the upper hand" — directs its power against another. Hall explains that the power in this case is the power "to mark, assign and classify, the power to represent someone or something in a certain way—within a 'regime of representation'".

For Hall, the 'regime of representation' is a specific discourse, Orientalism. However, a 'regime of representation' may also be a *medium* in which one group's representation dominates. The powers one group holds within a particular regime of representation also include the power to judge, to influence, to speak and be heard. Because these classifications and reductions happen in a field of power, in a hierarchy, the move to categorize types is one in which the categories are valued differently. To name, then, is to judge; to have and use the power to name, is to influence. The fact that others do not have this same power means than although they may

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[1] The emphasis is Hall's.

make oppositional judgments, these judgments are not *heard* within that particular regime of representation.

Though he does not use the same terms, Homi Bhabha also focuses on the regime of representation in his essay "The Other Question". Bhabha, however, addresses the terms upon which representations are made in particular contexts (in his case, colonial ones) in order to think through the particular ways in which truths are constructed in and for raced signs. His major argument is that critics of stereotypes should focus on the forms of truth produced in particular regimes of representation in order to "understand the productive ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse" (67).

Like Hall, Homi Bhabha addresses the notion of being fixed by a gaze that Fanon explores. Bhabha defines stereotype as a simplification of character in "an arrested, fixated form" that "impedes the circulation or articulation of the signifier of "race" as anything other than its fixity as racism" (75). In other words, the markers by which race is recognized in stereotypical representations hold meanings at such a simplistic level that the references cannot slide and change as humans do. In Bhabha's writing, these markers of race are always

characterized as visual and his visual arguments are especially pronounced where he responds to Fanon. They appear when Bhabha reads Fanon as taking the position that misrepresentations of blackness are misrepresentations because they are an exercise of power against black people. For Bhabha, such a reading "provides a 'visibility' to the exercise of power; gives force to the argument that the skin, as a signifier of discrimination, must be produced or processed as visible" (79). Raced markers also appear when Bhabha reads Fanon as making an argument about stereotype as both a firmly located sign and an open space that cannot be filled for once and for all: "The visibility of the racial/colonial Other is at once a *point* of identity ('Look, a Negro') and at the same time a problem for the attempted closure within discourse". Whether Bhabha's focus is on visible markers (such as skin) or acts of looking, visibility is associated with immutability.

Sander Gilman also wrestles with immutability of the sign as a visual problem. In his introduction to *Difference and Pathology* ("What Are Stereotypes and Why Use Texts to Study Them?") he defines stereotypes as the labels people give to the *images* we create of "things we

fear or glorify" (15). Gilman uses the terms "image" and "mirage" in ways that are almost synonymous with "stereotype". He uses "stereotype" to reference the notion of the "immutable structures" of characters fixed by certain repeated representations. Gilman writes that "image" and "mirage" have been used to refer to stereotypes when and because the representations are used in ways in which the structures are understood to shift. Especially in regards to literary stereotype, he explains, writers often use terms such as "image" and "mirage" to highlight the aspect of looking in stereotype without appearing to accept them as real.

According to Gilman's findings, these visual terms ("image" and "mirage") allow the user to emphasize the idea of false representations. If the reader of a cultural text is dealing with the "mirage" of whiteness, then that reader cannot be understood as believing in the myth. Whereas visual terms are associated with common sense notions of the real in the writings of Fanon, Hall, and Bhabha, it appears that looking is more commonly understood in Gilman's work - at least by the literary critics he mentions - to be a mode through which misrepresentations are commonly made.

Even though the critical invocations of "image" and "mirage" in Gilman's writing allow for an emphasis on the idea of illusion, such an emphasis also seems to imply that there is a real (stable) object behind the raced marker. This is a notion that Bhabha works against in his writing on stereotype. While he is certain to write of stereotype as "simplification", he argues that the point of recognizing stereotype as simplification ought *not* to be of recognizing a hidden "given reality". Instead, this stereotype ought to be recognized as a simplification through which we can understand the ambivalence of stereotypes. Despite their differences, Gilman and Bhabha both stress the fact that stereotypes pull in two directions. Bhabha writes about stereotypes as inherently ambivalent in regards to the stereotyped objects. "Stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices," he writes,

> It is much more an ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, overdetermination, guilt, aggressivity; the

> masking and splitting of 'official' and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse (81, 82).

For Homi Bhabha, the ambivalence of stereotyping means that the same sign vehicles can be used to reference objects for different reasons.

Sander Gilman writes of a similar kind of ambivalence regarding the stereotypical sign. Gilman's writing on stereotype begins with an emphasis on rigidity. He finds that this notion of a stereotype *fixing* the idea of the Other comes from the origins of the word. As a term associated with a printing process, "stereotype" was a term first created to reference the making of a mold from which identical representations could be made. According to Gilman, by the time the term was adopted by social psychologists, "stereotype" had come to represent the "immutable structure" of the images "through which we categorize the world" (15). Gilman also finds, however, that paradigm shifts can occur that also shift the meaning of the stereotype, "We can move from fearing to glorifying the Other. We can move from loving

to hating. The most negative stereotype always has an overtly positive counterweight" (18). In each case, however, the stereotype creates an Other. As Homi Bhabha writes, this other serves as "an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity" (67).

This ambivalence regarding the Other is one place where we can read stereotype in narratives that are meant to present a broader (non-fixed) range of human experience. If the otherness is at once an object of desire and derision for those who consider themselves not-black then it must also be a source of desire and derision for those who do understand themselves as black. There is the cultural blackness that is experienced as markers of the Self - as one's desired history, customs and features. There is also the mythical blackness that is experienced as markers of the Other or the Self as an Other - as the derided, detested, or rejected character from which most people would like to be distanced.

This ambivalence is one place where we can read the function of stereotype beyond the visual realm. Because the visible signifiers by which groups are assigned to stereotypical roles can be used to reference multiple,

sometimes contradictory roles, those who desire to displace stereotypes must do so by directing attention to the parts of stereotype that actually signify. Attention should not be on the product of the stereotypical process (dark skin equals black person which equals laziness) but rather, the function and use of the process (the idea that dark skin is naturally unlike light skin enables people to come to the conclusion that black people are naturally unlike white people). Whatever the object may be, however the terms of difference may be constructed, this same process is at work.

If we reread the writings of Fanon, Gilman, Bhabha, and Hall with an emphasis on the processes of stereotyping over the (visual) language in which we most readily encounter it, we will also be able to locate those places in the writing on stereotype where non-visual representations emerge. Sander Gilman's definition of stereotype relies on visual language that only seems purposeful at times. When he writes of the "mythic quality" of skin color, for example, the visual language is purposeful because Gilman reads the problem as a problem of visuality. This is especially the case when he references Frantz Fanon's thoughts about the West's

attitude toward the idea of blackness, which, he argues, "is but the projection of Western anxiety concerning the Other in terms of skin color" (29).

At other times, Gilman's reliance on visual terms seems incidental. For example, in the following passage, the visual language is used to reference acts of looking, but Gilman's words leave a space for us to imagine other kinds of acts in their place:

> In "seeing" (constructing a representational system for) the Other, we search for anatomical signs of difference such as physiognomy and skin color. The Other's physical features, from skin color to sexual structures such as the shape of the genitalia, are always the antithesis of the idealized self's (25).

Here Gilman lists physical features which the imagined "we" (who are makers and users of stereotypes) seek. The body parts and color he mentions are visual effects. Gilman's referencing of them is made in the context of a discussion of looking. However, the "seeing" he references is placed in quotation marks because it is not

a necessarily visual "seeing". Gilman sets up "seeing" as an equivalent structure for his crucial parenthetical "(constructing a representational system for)", which means that the kind of seeing to which Gilman refers actually could be replaced by a way of constructing a representational system in any other sense. He even specifically undermines the dominance of visual concerns when he emphasizes the conceptual elements of stereotypical representations:

> That blacks are the antithesis of the mirage of whiteness, the ideal of European aesthetic values, strikes the reader as an extension of some "real," perceived difference to which the qualities of "good" and "bad" have been erroneously applied. But the very concept of color is a quality of Otherness, not of reality (30).

Although the imagined reader of the stereotype is responding to aesthetic values (regarding color) that are based in looking here, Gilman stresses that it is not actually a response to visual stimuli. The response is,

rather, to a quality that happens to be associated with an image.

While Stuart Hall's essay on spectacle seems rather committed to the image, he is not able to hold fast to the visual nature of stereotype in all of his work on the topic. Hall continues to address the rigidity of signs and the exercise of power regarding representations of blackness in racist discourse in his essay on contemporary readings of Frantz Fanon, "The Afterlife of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks?*" In this essay, however, the visual nature of the sign is undercut by the idea of discourse as the primary force behind stereotypes. Hall does not reference distinct non-visual signs, but he does point to the non-visual elements of sign vehicles he has been discussing in solely visual terms. In Hall's writing, the non-visual senses seep into the discussion by negation of the visual, where the visual is the marker of biology, science, or realness.

"'Race' is not a genetic but a social category," Hall writes, "Racism is not a biological but a discursive regime" (21). Hall's turn towards a "discursive regime" is a turn towards a field of representation that does not

depend on a particular sense. Although he is especially concerned with the scopic drive in racist representations (in this and many other essays), there are moments in which Stuart Hall specifically argues that the visual elements of such representations are not the point on which the logic of the signs depends. He writes:

> Even in racist discourses, where the evidence of racial difference appears to be figured so obviously on the surface of the body, so plain for all to see (i.e.: "Look! A Negro!" and "Mama, see a Negro! I'm frightened!"), they are capable of carrying their negative connotations only because they function, in fact, as the signifiers of a deeper code - the genetic - which cannot be seen but which, it is believed, has the power of a science to fix and stabilise racial difference (21).

Hall's notion of the genetic as the "deeper code" to which markers of racial difference (such as color) actually refer seems to valorize the biological; however

this would be a misreading. In fact, Hall turns away from the idea of biology that is invoked in stereotype:

> It is not the status of racist discourse as 'scientific' but the fact that its elements function discursively which enables it to have 'real effects'. They can only carry meaning because they signify, through a process of displacement, further along the chain of equivalencies - metonymically (black skin - big penis - small brain - poor and backward - it's all in the genes - end the poverty programme - send them home!) (21)

It is discourse, then, that fixes the black body, not the gaze. This turn away from the image, however brief, is consistent with a move in Frantz Fanon's text. He cautions that the historo-racial schema he sketches for himself to deal with the problem of his appearance is not what Jean L'hermitte calls "the residual sensations and perceptions . . . of a tactile . . . and visual character". Instead, the skin that comes between the eye and the actual individual is the cloth of many stories

woven together. It is more than the gaze that fixes a body. It is also the set of details that give context to a particular moment of looking, the ambience. If we miss this point, we miss what eyes miss. That is, we miss whatever work is being done with other senses to indicate black presence in a scene and the sense it makes, especially when there is no visual signifier to reference it.

Even those thinkers who depend on visual elements or metaphors of visuality to make an argument about representation find themselves in need of a language to describe what is lacking in a wholly visual argument. The need for a non-visual language through which to think of a solution to the problems of exposure and the experience of being ignored is coupled with the need to address the way communal knowledge about the condition of being black is learned when it is not learned through acts of looking. What makes stereotypical representations of black people possible, what makes the link between signifiers and objects associated with black presence point towards an interpretant, is not the nature of the image or visuality, but rather the representational conventions that indicate the presence of an

unarticulated, sometimes unrecognized, dehumanizing process.

This discussion of the visual is a useful and perhaps necessary first step in our recognition of difference and its function in everyday cultural narratives. It does not tell the whole story of stereotype, however. Signs take many forms. Each form (medium, genre, or sense) shapes the nature of the representation and the possibilities within the sign system in its own way. Although Hall, Bhabha, Gilman, and Fanon all focus on the relation of sight and readings of visual signs to the making of stereotype, each of their arguments depends on the recognition that something *excessive* to the visual is at work.

Each of these writers exhausts the visual vocabulary of his thinking on stereotype and points towards its workings in forms. Each author briefly mentions that the narratives attached to reductive images (images that fix identities in place) can also be attached to other kinds of representations. These non-visual representations, however, their crucial differences from and surreptitious similarities to visual representations are never fully explored in these texts. Perhaps Hall, Bhabha, and Gilman

turn away from an engagement with the minimally acknowledged role of non-visual representations because they are heavily invested in conversing with Fanon's sightings and/or the visual anchor of Freud's writing on fetishism. Even if the role of imagery in these influential texts is the primary reason that little critical attention has been given to stereotypes not based in the field of vision, however, the particularities of non-visual media must also play a role. In the case of stereotyped blackness, the issue is compounded by the fact that blackness is commonly understood to be a visual entity.

This idea is explored in Charles Mills' book *Blackness Visible*. *Blackness Visible* concerns the (in)visibility of a *discussion* on blackness (and race) in the field of philosophy, not blackness as a visible trait. Even so, visuality and the role of appearances in the identification and classification of racial types play a role in his chapter "But What Are You Really? The Metaphysics of Race". Mills distinguishes between "racial realists", who believe that there are "natural human races" and "racial essences" but not necessarily an implicit hierarchy in which they are categorized, from

"racists", who believe that these types are necessarily ranked in order of value and roles in society. (45-47). Although Mills' object here is not stereotype in particular, the conditions for stereotyping to occur depend on this kind of "racial realism", where character is formed in the genes, in the absence of cultural surroundings, personal experiences, or recognition (acknowledgement) of such categories (50-54). As such, his discussion of the "criteria for determining Racial Identity" can be useful for understanding the differences upon which stereotypical arguments are made.

The criteria are these: bodily appearance, ancestry, self-awareness of ancestry, public awareness of ancestry, culture, experience, and subjective identification. They include "appearance" as a biological category and "awareness" as an ideological category. In his discussion of these criteria, visual markers of race ("the superficial morphological characteristics of skin color, hair type, and facial features", echoing Dubois' categories of "skin, hair, and bone") are extended to include "significant moral, intellectual, characterological, and spiritual characteristics". The categories of criteria that include awareness of one's

race (whether that awareness be self-directed or external) may be contingent upon characteristics of the moral, intellectual, characterological, or spiritual type, or they may be of the visual type. These criteria are further complicated in the chapter "Dark Ontologies", where it is argued that the "bodily appearance" criterion varies both across geographic region and over time.

The number of conditions under which racial identities are constructed and altered significantly adds to a discussion of stereotype because it enables us to recognize the assumed relationship between how racial identities mean in the social sphere (with regard to the raced being's intellectual capacity or emotional state) and how they are recognized (i.e.: *on* the body and *as* visual). What is missing from Charles Mills' criteria is an acknowledgement that race is experienced as more than just a visual sign. One can sound "black" just as one can look "black". Mills' paradigm is further complicated by the fact that the ability to identify oneself or another as belonging in a racial category can be altered not just by how one acts or looks, where and when, but also by how one sounds. The fact that the possibility for tracing race via sound is not explored in Mills' book may be a

critical blind spot in his work, but it also instructs us as to the visual nature of the discourse on blackness and the way it is naturalized as biological.

The concepts of the image and appearance that Mills explores are only partly related to Gilman's use of the term "image" in the introduction to *Difference and Pathology*. While Gilman's discussion of the "image" is related to Mills' discussion of "bodily appearance", it has more to do with an idea that is constructed about a type of people than it has to do with the ways in which they look. These meanings of the word "image" are often conflated in conversations about racial stereotype, however. For example, the image is both an idea and a visual sign in

George M. Frederickson's book *The Black Image in the White Mind,* which explores "the development of intellectualized racist theory and ideology as it was applied . . . to the 'problem' posed in the white mind by the presence of millions of blacks in the United States" (xi). Frederickson concerns himself, specifically, with theories created and disseminated by white theorists who made appraisals of "black character" or predictions about the destiny of black people between the years of 1817 and

1914. For the most part, the "image" of which Frederickson writes is an idea; it is an image in the sense of an impression or conception. This is the sense meant in the following passage from a chapter about prejudice and reformism: "The Northern image of the free Negro as a social danger came into sharper focus as time went on . . . [F]ree-Negro depravity developed in the 1820s" (5).

As the character of the black (or Negro) populations became more established, however, the "image" played a role in the sense of appearance. For example, in the chapter "Slavery and Race", Frederickson reprints a statement about racial difference by Thomas R. Dew (one of the proponents of the pro-slavery argument from Virginia). Dew wrote (in 1852) that Negroes differed from whites "in color and habits and [were] vastly inferior in the scale of civilization" (45). While the listing of color and habits might be read as a simple adding up of differences, it might be read in another way. There are two points of relevance for my study here. (1) It is possible to read Dew's placement of color and habits in proximity as having the effect of conflating the two. With this reading, blacks do not simply differ from

whites in color *and* habits; they differ in habits *because* they differ in color. (2) Irrespective of one's take on whether the color and habits should be read as necessarily linked or simply both present in Dew's argument, color is the marker for racial difference as natural (biological) and this fact also characterizes the experience of race as visual. The effect is one in which the perception of black difference only consciously manifests as a visual sign.

Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki's book by the same name (*The Black Image in the White Mind*) also conflates the sense of the term "image" as visual with the sense of "image" as a concept. Entman and Rojecki's book concerns stereotypes of black people in the media. Their primary focus is on television news, but there are also chapters on film, advertisements, and prime time television. A good deal of the book gives statistics about the responses of white viewers to images of black people. Entman and Rojecki take the stance that stereotypes of black people are not just spread through the media, but also constructed in part by the format in which representations of black people are presented (59).

They argue that stereotypes are formed through the use of "mental shortcuts" such as "schemas" and "frames". Schemas are sets of "related concepts that allow people to make inferences about new information based on already organized prior knowledge" (48). Frames, like schemas, are structures for understanding messages that are repeated in a medium (49). Schemas and frames then contribute to the mindset of a culture. Entman and Rojecki define culture as "the set of schemas most widely stored in the public's minds and the core thematic frames that pervade media message" (49). In the absence of contact with a black people, they argue, white viewers may depend upon their shared set of schemas and frames in order to "read" cultural messages about black people in the media. In this book, the media is framed as a system for image-making and the distribution of images. Entman and Rojecki do not consider the role of sound or audio media in their study. However, their discussion of the frames for media messages can be useful for a reading of sound in the representation of race in the media presented in *The Black Image in the White Mind*.

Even critical discussions of representations of blackness in the media that include sound often lack

attention to the ways in which sounds carry stereotypes, however. Michael Eric Dyson's book *Reflecting Black* is a key example. In this work, Dyson discusses African-American culture with an emphasis on the problems of representation surrounding black popular culture. Threaded through these articulations of the problems, however, are brief essays on the pleasures of engaging with the cultural production of African-American artists. Dyson opens with a statement about the ways in which the need to counteract stereotype produced essentialist narratives about the nature and motivation for African-American creativity. He ends up calling for a reading of the number of forces shaping black popular culture, including the effects of differences in class, gender, and spirituality. A number of the essays explore the narratives of film and television, but Dyson also considers the representations of black people in popular music, film soundtracks, and oral storytelling. The way he treats sound (or does not treat sound) in these works helps to shape my considerations here.

First, in a chapter on the postmodern spirituality of Michael Jackson, Dyson focuses mostly on Jackson's image - his dancing, his video narratives, and the

controversy over his changing face. Dyson's treatment of Jackson as an iconic figure rightly addresses the fact that Jackson's visibility is part of what makes him of interest as a cultural figure of such extreme fame. However, it is unfortunate that the sound of a musician's music is not considered alongside the images and the lyrics because it is the combination of sound and image that gives any musical artist his or her distinct character in popular music.

Next, there is some mention of sound in a brief essay on Luther Vandross and Anita Baker. Although the readings of sound consist mostly of adjectives ("fiery" and "lush" for Baker), the attention to the emotional reference of musical sound comes through. Of one song, Dyson writes: "From the song's symphonic . . . opening chords to its hauntingly otherworldly crescendo, Vandross stripped layer upon layer of inhibition away, until all that was left was pure feeling breathing ecstatic freedom" (61). Again, such a brief mention of this kind does not offer much in the way of a critique of sonic reference. However, Dyson's seemingly unconscious acknowledgement of his own readings of the sounds (the crescendo is haunting, the voice is fiery, etc.) allow an

opening to the idea that there are at least personal signs which use sound as a language. There are similar moments in his essay on the culture of hip-hop. Dyson writes:

> On 'Raising Hell', Run-D.M.C. showcased the sophisticated technical virtuosity of its DJ Jam Master Jay—the raw shrieks, scratches, glitches, and language of the street, plus the innovative and ingenious appropriation of hard-rock guitar riffs. In order to do this, Run-D.M.C. symbolically and substantively wedded two traditions—the waning subversion of rock music and the rising, incendiary aesthetic of hip-hop music—to produce a provocative musical hybrid of fiery lyricism and potent critique (5).

While the majority of Dyson's writing on hip-hop is about the lyrics and their place in a tradition of African-American social critique, the close readings of Jam Master Jay's practice offer a way of thinking about not just a personal sonic language, but also a shared one. The combinations of "shrieks, scratches, glitches, and

the language of the street" reference rock and hip-hop, and in so doing, they reference the idea of subversion and the new in addition to creating an aesthetic frame for the critique in the lyrics.

Attention to the symbolic language of sounds is most needed in, though unfortunately absent from, Dyson's essay on soundtrack to the Hollywood film *Mo' Money*. This absence is unfortunate because a reading of sound would have produced an interesting narrative to complement the one Dyson finds in the lyrics of the songs. The absence of an attention to the symbolic language of sounds is also unfortunate because, as Dyson notes at the opening of the essay, the music of contemporary black films has "played a crucial part in accenting plot and enlarging themes" (110). The role of music in accenting plots and enlarging themes is not only a product of the lyrics or of popular music idols functioning as symbols, but also of the discourse in the sounds themselves - the soundtrack, the score, and the voices in the films. The sounds of a film, the ways and moments in which a set of instruments or production techniques references extra-musical referents (such as the idea of "the city", "danger", or "blackness", for example) also play a role

in enlarging the themes of a film or accenting its plot. My work in later chapters is informed by some of the arguments Dyson makes in *Reflecting Black* and will address some of the absent areas of his critique.

Donald Bogle's book *Toms, Coons, Mammies, Mulattoes, and Bucks* also fails to account for the role of sound in stereotype. This work on black presence in the history of American film focuses primarily on stereotypical archetypes and the ways in which they have been repeated throughout film history. For each type - The Tom, The Coon, The Tragic Mulatto, The Mammy, and the Brutal Black Buck - Bogle gives a description of the first film in which it appeared and readings of subsequent appearances. He reads the images associated with each type (the costumes and gestures) but just as useful in the recognition of the stereotype at hand is the plot structure. For the tragic mulatto stereotype to take effect, for example, the character must not only look the part (i.e.: light skinned), but also suffer. After the introductory descriptions of each type, the bulk of the book tells the history of prominent black figures in film and films of different types in which there is a black presence. The discussion of this history deals mostly

with the role of blacks in these films and the controversies surrounding the films, if any.

There is a brief section near the end of the book entitled "Say It with Music". This section is not about what the music references in film, as one might assume, but instead concerns black musicals of the 1980s, from *Beat Street* to *Purple Rain*. Although the music itself is not read as playing a role in the representation of stereotypes, Bogle makes an insightful reading of the use of stereotypes in *Purple Rain* that includes the repetition of the tragic mulatto narrative (which is up front in the movie) and the way Morris Day's physical comedy recalls that of Mantan Moreland.

Bogle argues that *Purple Rain* repeats the tragic mulatto narrative through its treatment of Prince's character. He writes: "Prince's Kid was, of course, a lavish update of the old tragic mulatto. Not even Lonette McKee's Lila . . . seemed as tormented and troubled, as restless and searching, as this poor racially mixed creature . . ." (289). In a seemingly unrelated statement on the same page, he states that that the music is what makes *Purple Rain* a singular experience: ". . . each time a performer leaps into a musical number, the audience is

willing to ignore the clichéd, dopey story" (289). Although Bogle makes no claims as to a relationship between the convention of the narrative's representation of the tragic mulatto and the part music plays in the escape from that convention, a reader (of the film or of Bogle's essay) might easily draw this conclusion. The musical performances in the film, both because they often accompany celebration or ecstasy and because such performances are rare in tragic mulatto narratives, lead the film's narrative away from stereotype.

As for Morris Day's role in the participation in the film's stereotypes, Bogle stays closest to imagery, writing of Day's "slicked-down processed hair" and his "wild-man eyes (his shamelessly enjoyable eye pops rival those of Mantan Moreland)" (289). Amidst these references to image, however, there is a brief mention of Day's "jivey, 'cool breeze' delivery of his lines". Although Donald Bogle does not make the connection, Morris Day's character (also called "Morris Day") could be described as having a "rapid, high-pitched, squeaky-voiced banter", which is the description Bogle gives of the voice of Birmingham Brown, Mantan Moreland's character, in another chapter (74). Thus, although Bogle does not include sound

in his exploration of stereotypes, his arguments about the repetition of signs in the construction of stereotypical characters lays the groundwork for an investigation of stereotype in film narratives.

James Snead's book *White Screens / Black Images* is also highly visual, but his consideration of the construction and function of stereotype sometimes leads him to mention sound and aural coding. His conversations on the work of sound in the construction of stereotypes are useful in that they consider the relationships between sound and image. Even so, Snead gives considerably less attention to the aural in his critical conversations and often characterizes the elements of stereotype as deriving from aspects of the visual technology. Snead presents three devices by which black characters "have been consigned to minor significance" in American films: omission, marking, and mythification (4). Marking concerns the heightening of black difference (often via the use of blackface masks or other dark makeup) and omission concerns both the absenting of black characters from worlds they might otherwise inhabit and the absenting of possible plots. Snead characterizes mythification in visual terms when he writes that it

concerns "the realization that filmic codes describe an *interrelationship* between images" and requires "a pool of spectators" in his essay "Spectatorship and Capture in *King Kong*" (4).

The sense of the term "image" Snead uses could be read as meaning "concept" and "spectators" could be read as meaning "audience members" or "text readers" However, some of Snead's visual language cannot be set aside so easily. In an essay entitled "Mass Visual Productions", for example Snead writes that mythification ". . . involves a kind of enlargement of what it portrays. We 'look up to' films, literally, and screen events rapidly become larger than life" (143). This same idea is stated a bit differently in the chapter on *King Kong*:

> . . . white and black filmed images have become large-scale models, positive or negative, for behavior, describing (in the manner of myth in non-Western societies) structures, limits, and an overall repertoire from which both white and black viewers in the real world select possibility of action and thought (5).

Here, the sense is that stereotypes become "large-scale models . . . for behavior" because they are repeated *and* because they are projected on a screen, "larger than life".

Snead's examination of marking is also explained in mostly visual examples. He describes stereotypical representations of blackness as most often marked through color:

> As if the blackness of black skin itself were not enough, we seem to find the *color* black repeatedly overdetermined, marked redundantly, almost as if to force the viewer to register the image's difference from white images (5, the emphasis is mine).

Difference itself is 'marked' (coded and repeated) through the difference in color between white and black characters and emphasized in the artifice of blackface masks for white and black minstrels and darker makeup for some other black actors. Beyond skin color differences, Snead finds difference is also marked in costumes and the meanings of costume elements commonly found on black characters (such as aprons and gloves). Snead does not

give specific examples of non-visual means through which blackness is marked in film in either of the chapters in which he explains marking explicitly. He does mention, however, that "Negro dialect" is a common marking and notes that dialect was even used as a form of marking in the title cards of silent films (6).

Sound returns as a medium for marking blackness in Snead's chapter "Trimming Uncle Remus' Tales", where blackness is mythologized through dialect and signing. Of the dialect used in Disney's *Song of the South*, Snead writes:

> The dialect that Disney's blacks speak does not remotely resemble the (relatively more accurate) notations reported by [Joel Chandler] Harris. Instead, we hear a standard cinema black dialect, one denoting simply that *this is a Negro speaking* (91, 92 - the emphasis is Snead's).

Against this brief mention of dialect, Snead makes a note about music in the same film. He states that the blacks represented in the campfire meeting scene are "identifiable only as an indiscrete mass" (91). Part of

this grouping involves the fact that they are singing spirituals, which (Snead notes) are "actually the dubbed voices of white singers, singing songs not from the 'heart of the Old South' but from the pens of Hollywood songwriters" (91). Snead's main point in this paragraph is that the codes are recognizable. Without using the voices of actual black people or the speech patterns of actual black people, the narrative codes the characters and scene as black via sounds. Although the sounds do not ring true (read: "authentically black") to Snead's ear, what matters in the narrative's code is that they are understood as not-white. The contrast, alone, is enough to mark the (mythic) blackness through sound. This is my reading; Snead does not make these arguments. His mentions of music and dialect are simply anecdotes in his larger discussion of visual rhetoric, but these anecdotes make a route for my arguments about sound.

I extend Snead's arguments about mythification and the amplification of the image to sound. Mythification and marking of black character(s) through sound are a product of repetition and amplification, not only on screen, but also over the theatre speakers and radio airwaves. For it is not just the screen's size that makes

filmic images large, it is also the fact that film is a form of mass communication. The relationship can be explained through Snead's arguments about belief. He writes that the "technical brilliance" of (the images) of big-budget, innovative films adds to the sense that the recorded images capture their subjects as they really are (137). He also argues what seems to be a contradictory point: the degree of artifice in blackface performance emphasized the difference of blacks (from whites) in such a way that the *difference* seemed more real. When white actors (in blackface) played black roles, the blackface mask signified the sense that it would be too dangerous to use (record, work with) real black people. When black actors played these or similar roles, their skin was often darkened in order to mark (1) that they were filling the same roles that white actors had played and (2) that they were actors, wearing the professional costume. The blackface mask marked them appropriate for spectatorship.

There is a similar pattern in radio. Just as early black actors on screen had to wear the blackface mask to heighten the difference between white and black characters, many had to learn dialect from white coaches

to play black characters on the radio (William Barlow, "Commercial and Noncommercial Radio" 197; Barlow, "From the Jazz Age to Jim Crow" 31; and Snead 146). The dialect used was not a product of vernacular black culture; it was produced as a code, used to mark difference. The way the dialect of minstrel performances on the radio determined the limits of the sounds of the earliest performances by black actors on the radio is equivalent to the way the blackface mask of minstrel performances determined the limits of the images of early black performers on screen. The dialect of minstrel performances is related to black vernacular speech as burnt cork masks are related to actual dark skin. In each case, the contrasts in speech and skin are heightened for the sake of marking difference. The same may be said of black musics. In representations of stereotyped black figures, the music used to signify black difference may not be African or derived from African musical traditions at all. Sometimes all that is needed to reference mythic blackness in sound is a perceived contrast from white sound.

Minstrel performances are unique in the extremes that are presented to mark (and thus stereotype) black

figures. As such, they present an opportunity for expanding the conversation on stereotype in a way that considers sound more prominently. From the mid-nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, minstrel shows were publicly celebrated and reviled in the United States. Both Walt Whitman and Mark Twain were said to have appreciated minstrel shows as a truly American art form, while Marcus Garvey and Frederick Douglass were outspoken in their disapproval. In an oft-repeated statement, Douglass is said to have called minstrel performers "the filthy scum of the white society" (in Eric Lott, 15). This is the terrain into which Eric Lott enters with his book *Love and Theft*.

Lott argues that "the blackface mask" should be read as a signal of a complex set of relationships beyond the embrace or rejection of blackface minstrelsy. The mask, Lott writes, should be read not as a "repetition of power relations" but as a "signifier for them - a distorted mirror, reflecting displacements and condensations and discontinuities between which and the social field there lags, unevennesses, multiple determinations" (8). In other words, for Lott, blackface minstrelsy references not just a ridiculed, reduced black object, but also a

desire on the part of the white performer to transcend the color line. However distorted the terms of that attempt may be, the implication is that any consideration of minstrelsy today should take into account the layers of complicated motivations for the minstrel performance in order to understand the performance. Lott notes Homi Bhabha's argument (in "The Other Question") that with all stereotypical representations there is an "ambivalence" regarding the object referenced that allows for the powerful to mark and shun difference while attempting to consume it (6).

It is interesting that Lott uses the blackface mask here as a metonym for minstrel performance, which could just as easily be characterized by its signature costumes, gestures, voices, and music. To use the mask as the signal of minstrel performance makes some sense because it is a striking image and because the mask actually caused confusion among some audience members who thought they were seeing real black people when they were seeing white people in blackface. The possibility for this confusion is part of what made minstrel performances such a hot-button issue in their day and this situation is one of the major characteristics of minstrel shows.

However sound is a large part of the performance. Even the word "minstrel" denotes a singer. The fact that American minstrel shows are related to a European tradition of minstrelsy[2] that does not invoke such racial transgression is a fascinating idea because it implies that the visual marking of the blackface mask not only marks black performance from white performance, it also marks American performance from European performance and simultaneously codes American performance black. If we erase sound as a signal for minstrel performance we may lose track of both the discourse around the sounds of blackface minstrelsy that were in circulation from the beginning and the ways in which the legacy of blackface minstrelsy is today carried through sound.

Towards the end of keeping track of this discourse, I highlight Eric Lott's acknowledgement of three forms through which the audience members recognized the role of sound in the representation of blackness in the minstrel show: voice, the instrumentation of the music, and noises. In a chapter entitled "Genuine Negro Fun: Racial Pleasure and Class Formation in the 1840s", Lott

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[2] See William J. Mahar's chapter "Opera for the Masses: Burlesques of English and Italian Opera" as well as Eric

interrupts his own argument about the spectacle of minstrel show to make a very brief mention of "hiccupping chuckles" - the words one audience member from an 1846 show by the Ethiopian Serenaders used to describe the "riot and commotion, contortion and pungency" (these are Lott's words) of their show (Lott 140). Lott writes of these "hiccupping chuckles" as "punctuating the proceedings" and continues to argue that minstrel shows were "an art of performative irruption, of acrobatics and comedy, ostensibly dependable mechanisms of humorous pleasure". Though he does not comment on the chuckles as a sound in particular, Lott's use of the word "punctuating" in such close proximity to the words "pungency" and "irruption" and "acrobatics" helps to portray the minstrel performances as those in which all the senses are engaged. Audiences must have experienced them as not merely spectacular, but also sensual in the most complete sense of the word.

In a chapter entitled "The Blackening of America: Popular Culture and National Cultures", Lott describes the mix of cultures from which the humor, songs, and

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Lott's chapter "The Blackening of America: Popular Culture and National Cultures"

dances found in American minstrel shows derived. Citing Hans Nathan, Robert Toll, and Robert Cantwell, Lott argues that the sources for these materials were so mixed in the early years of the minstrel shows that their "'racial" origins" were "undecidable" (94). Nevertheless, in order to describe this mix, Lott decides the origins of quite a few materials:

> black lore interspersed with southwestern humor (itself often as interracial creation); black banjo techniques and rhythms interrupting folk dance music of the British Isles (as it had been taken up by whites in the United States); the vigorous earth-slapping footwork of black dances warring with the Irish lineaments of blackface jigs and reels. The very instrumentation of minstrel bands followed this pattern: the banjo and jawbone were black, while the fiddle, bones and tambourine (derived perhaps from an instrument called the bodhran) were Irish (94).

There are quite a few references to sound in this passage as well as cultures. I am particularly interested in the racial coding of the instruments because they are neither part of the body (as skin is) nor are they relationships to the body that could be explained as referencing race through genetics (as could dances or singing voices or speech). That some instruments could be coded "black" and others could be coded "Irish" or "white", in a moment of Lott's argument that is characterized by the idea that such codings are futile, suggests that the racial codings of the sounds of the instruments must have had a powerful hold on the imaginations of some audiences—if not the past, then the present ones.

Voices appear in a number of places in *Love and Theft* because they are the carriers for both speech (dialect in particular) and music. In a chapter called "Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture", Lott recounts one experience by Frederick Douglass, who, having attended a concert by the black minstrels of Gavitt's Original Ethiopian Serenaders ("partly from a love of music"), describes their singing as "not even a tolerable representation of the character of colored people" (36). "[T]heir attempts at it,"

Douglass writes, "possess a plentiful lack of it" For Lott, Douglass' words demonstrate the way that "blackness" is culturally constructed, "produced" and not "innate" (36). I agree with Lott's assessment, but I find it particularly interesting because in the nexus of Douglass' words and Lott's words is the notion that this (culturally constructed, produced) blackness is something that can be *heard*. It is also something that can *fail* to be heard, even when the visual signs point to blackness. In this case there is presumably a double visual reference to blackness in the black face and the blackface mask. As much as Douglass detested the voices of these minstrels, others loved them.

In the chapter entitled "Love and Theft: 'Racial' Production and the Social Unconscious of Blackface", Lott cites at length the unnamed author of an article called "Negro Minstrelsy — Ancient and Modern", which was published in *Putnam's Monthly* in 1855. This author writes:

> I listen with attentive ears—for I know by experience the gratification in store for me—and soon catch the distant tones of the human voice—now

> more faintly heard, and now entirely lost. . . . [N]ow, anew, I hear the sound of those manly negro voices swelling up upon the evening gale. Nearer and nearer comes the boat, higher and higher rises the melody, till it overpowers and subdues the noise of the oars, which in their turn become subservient to the song, and mark its time with harmonious beating . . . (58).

Immediately following this passage, Lott writes:

> If black men could do this with their voices, imagine what they could do in the flesh! But they remain voices, without presence, imaginative projections, and these accounts seem to require that they remain so, even as the black male is referred to compulsively . . .

I agree with Eric Lott that the writer refers to black men compulsively and that the compulsion is to approach their mythical black masculinity without approaching their bodies. I also agree that the mythical black men referenced by the author are "imaginative projections"

but I do not agree that their voices do not constitute a kind of "presence". Sound is as real as a body; sound can envelop a listener, it can near and literally enter the body of a listener. In this way, a voice is more present than the view of a body, even a very close-up view. The difference that a black voice represents can literally be consumed.

Lott cautions, however, that the characteristics of minstrel performance that are now understood to reference blackness are actually derived from a multitude of cultures. In "The Blackening of America", he writes that the skits and songs performed by blackface performers often "incorporated Irish brogues and other ethnic dialects" and that conversely blackface itself was used to "represent all ethnicities on the antebellum stage prior to the development of ethnic types" (95). The fact that culturally Irish sounds could be used to represent mythically black characters and that the darkness that would later serve to mark and fix a particular type could have been used to mark *any* ethnic type is in line with James Snead's argument that the marking we recognize in the blackface mask or the use of dialect in minstrel

shows represents *difference* more than a particular blackness.

What Lott does not argue here, but can be read through Snead's related arguments on mythification and Fanon's (and his critical descendants') arguments on the condition of being fixed, is that the moments in which particular types are coded in specific ways in narrative are moments in which some group has a need to mark a specific social division. This idea is examined thoroughly in Marlon Riggs' excellent documentary *Ethnic Notions,* which explores the ways in which stereotypes of blackness have shifted in response to the political moment at hand. Riggs' documentary shows the ways in which black characters in American film were portrayed as docile and genial when it was in the best interest of slaveholders for white viewers to imagine that slavery was good for black people and then portrayed as savage and angry when the institution of slavery was threatened.

Riggs traces the development of plot lines and images. He also explores the use of a mythic black dialect to demonstrate that blacks were not intelligent enough to be free, to be politicians, or to be citizens in given moments throughout American film history. The

implication of the representation of the stereotype that blacks are unintelligent through dialect, however, is that blacks are unintelligent because they do not know how to use the English language correctly. Certainly this idea is at the root of the stereotype, but the manner in which the meanings of the stereotypes of blackness that are carried in sound are *fixed* has as much to do with the repetition of sounds such as the "rapid, high-pitched, squeaky-voiced banter" of Birmingham Brown [Bogle 74]). In our readings of the voice and the ways in which representations of black voices have contributed to stereotype, it is important to trace the moments when the sounds used to mark blackness become fixed or shift. Although it is not my project in this work to trace historical shifts in the sounds that reference blackness alongside the shifts in political moments for which the media makers desire to alter mass views on black people, perhaps that will be a project I take up in the future. Riggs' model needs to be expanded in this way and the work on representations of blackness in sound also needs Riggs' model.

The scholars I address here have contributed a wealth of knowledge about the construction of stereotype, the nature of the gaze and engagements with raced images, and the construction and recognition of blackness. Many of them have offered extremely useful ideas about sound, but often only as brief and disconnected departures from their theorizations about the visual field, which is always imagined as primary. It is crucial that sonic stereotypes be explored in further depth because sound is arguably the second-most influential sense through which raced representations are produced and received. Sound takes this place among the non-visual senses because, like visual representations, sonic representations are frequently part of ceremonies that are more public than those of textural, olfactory, and taste-based representations.

While "readers" of various non-visual, non-auditory cultural texts (including perfumes, fabrics, and food) may make interpretations of smells, textures, and tastes that are indeed markers of blackness, the signs shaped by (or produced within) these sensory experiences are usually presented to much smaller audiences at a time. The smells of sandalwood, hair grease, and bacon grease

may be strongly connected to black people and beliefs about black people in the minds of some culture readers, for example, but these smells are not as intelligibly black as the sounds of drums or the image of dark skin. Acts of tasting, touching, and smelling all warrant further exploration within the discourse of stereotypes because they are intimate acts. For the same reason, the tools we use to theorize about them will differ greatly from those we use to theorize about images of necessity.

Acts of listening and hearing (or refusing to do so) also require different tools from those of looking and seeing. Because hearing and listening (to a body, for example) do not require proximity (to it), they are not always intimate acts. They are often acts that happen in public spaces, in response to people who are far away. Like looking, listening can make us aware of our distance from other people. In fact, listening may make us feel even more distant from others because the ear can hear people and things much further away than the eye can see. Also like images, sounds can be recorded and replayed outside of the spatial or temporal contexts in which they were made.

This distancing effect makes it possible for sounds to stand in for absent bodies. Where images are often associated with biology (and natural differences), however, sounds are most often associated with choice and communication through the modes of speech, music, and even noise. As such, sonic black modes of communication have been highly policed (from legislation against drumming during slavery to contemporary debates over Ebonics). Black sounds have also been much mimicked (from minstrel shows to *Saturday Night Live* sketches.) The harnessing and appropriation of sounds associated with black presence have garnered attention in recent critical anthologies edited by Greg Tate (*Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking From Black People*), Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit (*The Real Ebonics Debate*), and Adalaide Morris (*Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*). All of these conversations should inform a discussion of sonic stereotypes, but these texts do not place stereotype at the center of the project. Some of them do not name stereotype as a matter of concern, even when concerns over static, dehumanizing representations are at stake. Likewise, of the writers whose work on stereotype I have explored here, both Hall

and Fanon reference raced, reduced representations of blackness in the forms of speech and music. However, they do not take the next step of thinking about communication through sound as a field of representation. Why would such a large field of representation (and one to which at least some of the writers mentioned give a critical nod) not be theorized in more depth?

The brevity of many writers' engagements with raced sonic representations is probably a product of the fact that until recently there were very few resources on non-visual representations (even beyond discussions of identification, stereotype, race, and colonialism) that presented a usable vocabulary for thinking about sound. Recent developments in sound theory such as Michel Chion's work on film and Douglas Kahn's work on sound art enrich the discourse on representation in their fields and open up new ways of thinking about stereotype.

In his books *The Voice in Cinema* and *Audio-vision,* for example, Chion argues that in addition to thinking about the narrative effect of point of view shots in film we must consider points of audition (*Audio-vision* 89). In film, it has long been understood that the relationship of an audience to what and how much a character sees can

create a disparity of knowledge that heightens the elements of suspense, mystery, and surprise. The questions of (1) what audiences hear and do not hear and (2) what characters share and do not share the audiences' points of audition offer many new ways to think about stereotype and identification in film. As we think about the implications of theories of the gaze for the study of raced representations, we will also need to think about the implications of sonic experiences.

Such experiences might include 'envelopment' and Douglas Kahn's argument (in *Noise, Water, Meat*) that we can think of noise as the label we give to sounds when we find ourselves immersed in foreign sounds or sounds out of place. Points of audition, envelopment, and the work of non-diegetic and/or off-screen sounds will also have implications for the study of raced representations if we put these conversations from film in conversation with the other conversations on visual representation that have been so useful to the study of raced images and looking relations.

Theorizing sonic representation is perhaps especially necessary in regards to stereotypes of black people because the terms upon which black difference

(from whiteness) is characterized are often linguistic and musical. Though sound and images are both senses through which we can experience people and things from a distance, the nature of sound and the media we use to listen are quite different from the nature of vision and visual media. They are so different that although the stereotypes employed through sound may be conceptually identical, we often do not hear them resonating. Addressing the non-visual ways through which types are formed will allow us to address the many different ways through which race is invoked. Black presence is heard as well as seen. Because the concepts associated with black presence are more significant than the materials through which they are referenced, any one material is as potentially meaningful as any other material.

Sound, Stereotype, and the Office of the Ear

> We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.) however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth. Myth sees in them only the same raw material; their unity is that they all come down to the status of a mere language.
>
> Roland Barthes, "Myth Today"

A consideration of the role of sound in stereotype requires a reconsideration of the terms, for it is in part the language itself that keeps us from making the connections between critical investigations of how sounds work and critical investigations of how reductive racial types are constructed. In order to link these investigations one must find or create language that is specific to the situation of representing and encountering raced types in sound in order to make distinctions between what happens in sound and what happens in images. One must also fashion a language that is general enough to encompass all representations, regardless of the medium or sense in which they are cast.

The terms through which I make my arguments in this project and the relationships between them are best understood when imagined in the shape of a tall rectangle

(as opposed to a wide one), across which there is a conceptual grid. On left side are the terms I have used throughout the project in order to define ways in which representations of blackness (mythic or cultural) may be encountered in sound. On the other side we might place the categories through which sounds, their meanings and values, are most commonly discussed. Such a grid would look like this:

Sonic signs	Voice
Sonic stereotype	Music
Sonic construction of stereotype	Noise
Raced representation	Silence

In this part of the project I discuss both sides of the conceptual grid and the ways we might use the grid to understand the nexus between any two items from either side of the grid.

In order to understand the terms at the most basic level, we must back up before we encounter the signifying material (medium, sense, that which we engage primarily) and object (meanings – intended, projected, and received) and begin at the processes through which material and meanings are connected. Therefore, instead of concentrating on the sign as made of two parts (Ferdinand de Saussure's 'signifier' and 'signified'), I use Charles Peirce's tripartite model of the sign. Peirce's sign demands attention to the process of moving from encountering the material to understanding that the material has a meaning to thinking about the material's meaning in a given context. I have chosen to use Peirce's language for two main reasons. (1) Although Ferdinand de Saussure's more common term "signifier" could be used in my arguments, it is commonly associated with language and images. Peirce calls the part of the sign that signals a meaning the "sign vehicle". This language is helpful to a discussion of some sonic signs because it helps us remember that any material can be a vehicle for the sign (2).

The focus on the process of representation highlights the fact that each sign has a primary object

(where meanings are first connected to the vehicle) and an ultimate object (which Peirce calls the interpretant, where the sign ultimately points in a given context). The three parts of the sign are especially helpful in thinking about racial stereotype because stereotypes function in the gray area between a sign's object and its interpretant.

SIGN

When I write "**sign**," I am writing of a message carried in any medium that can be encountered, which references an idea, which makes it possible to reference a second, ultimate meaning. This ultimate meaning of the sign in a given context can be a personal one (shared only by the giver and receiver of the message) or it can be a cultural one (shared by many people, including the giver and receiver of the message). This "thing" that is a relationship between what Charles Peirce calls a sign vehicle and the chain of meanings linked to it is ultimately a process. Implicit in experiencing the process *as a sign*, however is the act of forgetting (or never knowing) the process by which its meanings have become intelligible. If we once knew how the parts of a

sign were connected, in the moments we receive the message of a sign -- the stoplight shines red; put your foot on the brake -- we lose the sense of how the message was constructed. When it comes to stereotype, this type of forgetting (or not knowing) that is always present when we understand a sign is compounded by a forgetting/not knowing regarding the modality of the sign.

In Charles Peirce's essay "Logic as Semiotic", he classifies modalities for the sign into three categories -- that of the icon, the index, and the symbol. For Peirce, an iconic modality is one in which the signifying material resembles the object to which is refers. In his words: "Anything whatever, be it quality, existent individual, or law, is an Icon of anything, in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it" (102). The international sign on the door of a public bathroom that tells viewers whether it is for women or men is presented in an iconic modality to the extent that it references a men's or women's bathroom by looking like a man or a woman. Peirce's indexical modality is one in which the sign's vehicle is proof of the existence of the object. He writes that the index: "refers to the Object

that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object" (102). Footprints in the sand indicate the direction of the person who walked through the sand because the person's act of walking in the direction made the marks that point in that direction. Finally, in signs with a symbolic modality, sign vehicles are linked to their objects by means of the repeated associations made between them. Peirce writes that the symbol: "refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object" (102). The red light at the stoplight indicates that it is time to stop the car because it is a marker chosen to represent the message "stop". We do not understand the red light to *look like* the act of stopping or to *appear because* someone has already stopped. The use of this color to carry the message is arbitrary and it is understood through convention. Because symbols are related to their objects by convention, stereotypical racialized representations, when they are understood as such, tend to be discussed as symbols.

It is commonly understood that stereotypes function as symbols because they operate according to a logic that

works by convention. Donald Bogle stresses the ways in which conventions of representing black characters in film were constructed and updated over time throughout his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*. In his book *White Screens / Black Masks* James Snead addresses stereotype as conventional when he argues that the mythification of black characters in film is a product of the ways in which black characters are repeatedly marked (by costume and make-up) and repeatedly shown performing the same roles in films. Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki are engaging a similar idea when they argue that television audiences understand the types they view according to "frames" and "schemas". In other words, to say that we commonly understand stereotypes as produced in a symbolic modality is to say that with stereotypical signs the sign vehicles are arbitrarily linked to objects and are only legible by virtue of repetition. While I agree that the logic of stereotypes is a symbolic one, the everyday use of stereotypes depends on the misunderstanding that the logic is not arbitrary, but rather natural.

I find that the troubling relationships between signifying materials and the racialized meanings

audiences and/or artists make of them are often *read* as iconic or indexical, even though this reading is a misreading. The 'truth' which is often said to exist in a stereotype, for example, may actually result from a *failure* to recognize a symbolic (conventional) relationship between signifiers and their objects. Readers may instead read an indexical relationship (where the signifier refers to the object by virtue of being evidence of a process which requires the object) or an iconic one (where the signifier refers to the object by virtue of its similarity to it). One may hear of a neighborhood with a high crime rate and a presence of black people and read an indexical relationship between the two, for example. Such a reading might manifest in an idea such as: *A high crime rate is a sign that black people are present.* In such a case, the relationship that links high crime with black people is indexical because it is based on an idea that black presence leads to high crime. On the other hand, in the idea that a person -- say, a black man -- looks like a criminal, the relationship linking black features and criminal behavior would be iconic. In this case, the relationship between a particular person (or representation) and a general

category is based on likeness. The fact that the beliefs that black presence causes crime and criminals look black are linked because of previous links (the conventional representations of criminals or crime, the hyper-legibility of repeated ideas) demonstrates the faulty basis of these interpretations. It does not, however, explain how these troubling meanings are made and continue to function. In order to understand how signifiers linked to black people function in stories, it is necessary to read along the lines of the index and the icon as well as the symbol. When dealing with resemblance, however, the dominance of visual discourse may obscure the ability to recognize the sonic icon. Because 'likeness' is overwhelmingly associated with appearance, representations that depend upon iconic logic are extremely difficult to identify when the sign vehicles are not visual.

In order to address the iconic modality in sound without the reliance on terms associated with visuality, I use the term fidelity. The **fidelity of the sonic sign** is the extent to which a recording or representation of a sound *sounds like* what it represents. In the sonic icon, the sign's vehicle is linked to its object because it is

understood to sound like that object. A few bars from "Flight of the Bumblebee" could be a sonic icon in that it references the bumblebee by sounding like a bumblebee. The thunderstorm sound effect at the opening of many versions of *Macbeth* could be a sonic icon because it references a storm by sounding like the thunder. The sound "Woop! Woop!", mouthed by the rapper KRS1 in the song "Sound of Da Police", could also be a sonic icon because it references the police by sounding like a police siren.[3] . The sound we hear -- KRS1's sound effect (the sign vehicle) -- references the idea of police presence (the interpretant, or the ultimate object of the sign) because it *sounds like* a siren (the object), which is one of the ways in which police presence can be recognized in everyday life.

We already acknowledge fidelity as a quality of sound recordings. In audio engineering circles (and in commercial stereo system consumer culture) the fidelity of a recording is the extent to which it sounds like the original performance. High fidelity recordings are those

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[3] The lyrics to the chorus of that song are "Woop-woop! That's the sound of the police! / Woop-woop! That's the sound of the beast!"

for which the recording is faithful to the original performance. Low fidelity recordings are those for which the circumstances of the recording (the sound of the room, of the microphone, or of some other aspect of the recording process, for example) have can be heard alongside (or heard to interfere with) the sound of the original performance in the recording.[4] Playback systems can also be high fidelity or low fidelity. High fidelity systems (such as some stereo systems or studio monitors), for example, are those which are built to produce a minimum of extra sounds, allowing for the sound produced to sound most like the original performance.

In low fidelity systems (such as many alarm clock radios), the quality of the sound is not understood to be as important as the message it carries (i.e.: *Wake up. It's 6:30am.*) A low fidelity playback system still allows the sound that comes from it to indicate the presence of an original performance, but it does not demonstrate the concern for an accurate representation of the choices

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[4] In truth, the sound of the room et al is more faithful. The high fidelity recording has a maximum of desired sounds and a minimum of undesirable sounds, but the *idea* at stake in a high fidelity recording is that the recording is faithful to the desired sound.

made in the recording. If we extend the idea of fidelity to a reading of sonic icons, we can recognize not only the extent to which one representation of a sound *sounds like* another but also the extent to which the system of representation at work *intends to be faithful* to the sound source. To consider what this might mean in terms of sonic icons, let us return briefly to the conversation of the significance of the sound of James Brown's band that I presented in the introduction through a consideration of two representations of the same part of a James Brown song.

Both the hip-hop group Boogie Down Productions and the Afro-Pop group sample the same guitar lick from the James Brown song "Soul Power". In the Boogie Down Productions (BDP) song "Poetry", the sound is a sample (a short recording) from the original James Brown song. (The sound source in this case is not the original performance, but the recording of the original performance.) The riff sampled is repeated in order to create a layer of sound over which KRS1 tells a story about himself as a poet. Although he does not mention James Brown and the original source of that sound, the original context of the guitar lick is associated with

James Brown's band because in other parts of BDP song, samples of Brown's voice punctuate the track. The sonic sign that the sample from Brown's band forms in the BDP song "Poetry" is high fidelity because the sound references James Brown's band *and* BDP demonstrates the intention to reference Brown's recording by also including sound of his voice. The modality in which this sonic sign is presented is indexical (as in the case of a footprint); the guitar sound in the BDP song "Poetry" indicates James Brown's band because James Brown's band's act of making the music created the sound.

The Belgium based Afro-pop group Zap Mama made use of the same guitar riff *sound* in their song "Mr. Brown", but they did not use a sample. This a cappella group represents the sound of this guitar riff with the use of their own voices. The modality in which this sonic icon is presented is iconic because the sound we hear is not a direct product of the recording of James Brown's band. The sound that references the band does so by sounding like the band. As with the song "Poetry", this sound is repeated to create a layer of sound over which melodies change. Unlike "Poetry", there are no words in "Mr. Brown" except the title. Because the title references

James Brown and the sound references his band, and also because the liner notes state that the song is presented as an homage to Brown, the listener can understand the sonic sign that references Brown's band to be high fidelity. There is an intentional reference to the making of the same sound in another context (the James Brown recording) and its meaning in that context (this is the sound of the James Brown band).

If the same sound were to be used in another context in which there were no reference to the making of the original sound, or in which some part of the second use of the sign obscured the meaning of the first, that use would be low fidelity. The representation of the sound could still be linked to the sound source and therefore it might still indicate the sound source, but the parts of the meaning of the original sound that are lost in the representation would alter the functioning of the sonic sign. My interest in the use of low fidelity sonic signs is that this is how sonic stereotypes function. Not all low fidelity sonic signs are stereotypes (it is possible to represent sound in one context that obscures the first without necessarily limiting a character's human potential), but all sonic stereotypes are low fidelity.

They function by claiming a link between the sign vehicle and the ultimate object of the sign that is iconic (based on fidelity, likeness and faithfulness to the sound source) or sometimes even indexical (when the sound source is a sound produced by the type being presented). In the end, however, the link between the sign vehicles and their ultimate objects is based on conventions that obscure the ways in which the original sounds mean in other kinds of communications.

STEREOTYPE

In the previous chapter ("Mythic Blackness and the Eye"), I discuss arguments that define **stereotype** as a visual problem surrounding images. As I established, however, even these conversations about stereotyped images address a larger concern about these images in a field of discourse in which they are encountered. While their arguments only open up this discussion for the purposes of thinking about images, we can identify and think about the function of sounds in this same discourse. I do not go into further detail about this issue here, but a definition of stereotype that will

wrest it from its characterization as wholly visual may prove useful in this part of the discussion.

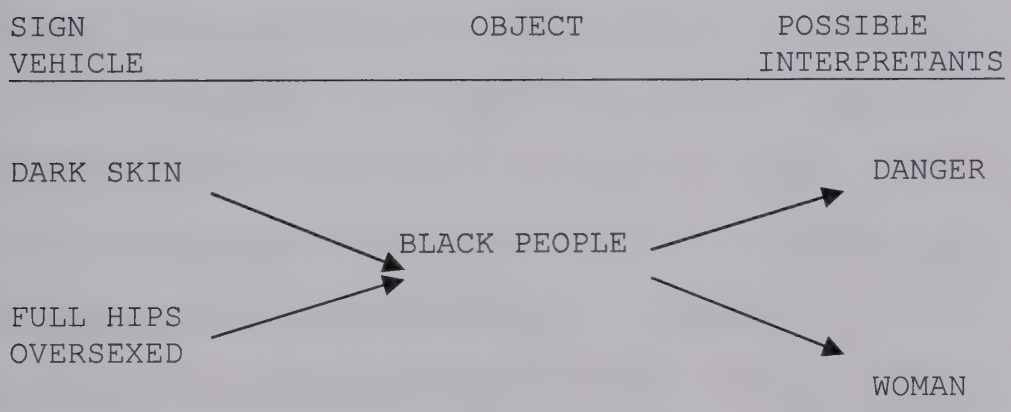
In my writing, "stereotype" refers to a kind of sign that links a signifying material to a kind of person. This combination is then linked to an idea in a given context based on the discourse around that object. Let us imagine, for example that someone sitting in a parked car sees a black person walking down the street and locks the car door. The stereotype at work there is an understanding that black people are dangerous (or criminal, or destructive, etc.) One of the possible ways in which that logic may work is that the person's dark skin (as sign vehicle) is linked to the idea of black people (the object), which is linked to the idea of danger, crime, or destruction.

FIGURE 1: Stereotype Logic with Visual Vehicle

When the sign in question is a stereotype, the meanings within the sign (the object and interpretant) are always determined by a discourse that both produces

the interpretant (the idea that is characterized by the sign) and fixes the object in such a way that any time that object is referenced it recalls all of the other signs of which it is a part. If the object of a stereotype (sign) is "black people" or "blackness" (mythic or cultural) in the context of the United States, the discourse around what blackness is feeds the meaning derived from every sign vehicle associated with it.

FIGURE 2: Multiple Vehicles Access Multiple Meanings through One Object



Because stereotypes function in such a way that the experience takes the reader straight from the sign vehicle to the interpretant, all of the vehicles referencing the same object ultimately lead to all of the interpretants linked to those objects. If the discourse

around an image, such as the visual difference between blacks and whites in one case contributes to the stereotype that dark skin = evil/danger and in other case contributes to the stereotype that full hips = oversexed woman, then dark skin may also be used to reference sexuality and full hips may also be used to reference evil.

This process does not end with visual sign vehicles. Any material can be the vehicle for a sign -- a musical sound or an accent. Any of these materials might lead the mind to an interpretant through an object. These materials, too, are linked to interpretants through the way station of ideas around mythic blackness. Mythic blackness operates as a route through which some sign vehicles (materials in different senses) gain meaning. A sound associated with blackness can reference an interpretant from another vehicle. This is often the way sonic stereotypes function.

SONIC STEREOTYPE

When I write "**sonic stereotype**", I am referring to stereotypes that have a sound as the sign vehicle. Sonic stereotypes mostly work like stereotypes with visual

vehicles, in that the sonic vehicles are connected to an object around which there is discourse, and this discourse associated with the object leads to a meaning (the interpretant).

FIGURE 3: Stereotype Logic with Sonic Vehicle - Southern

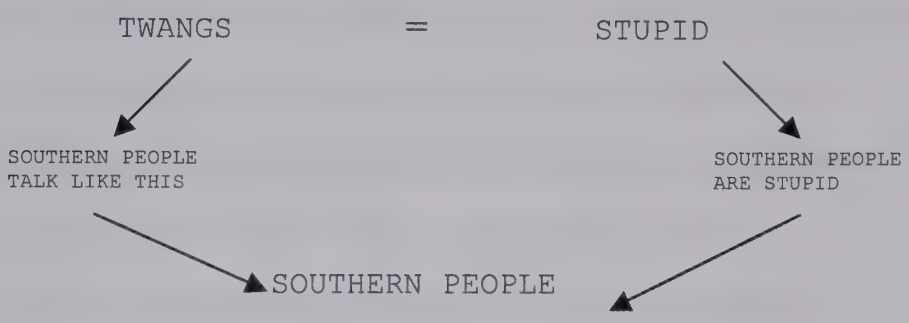
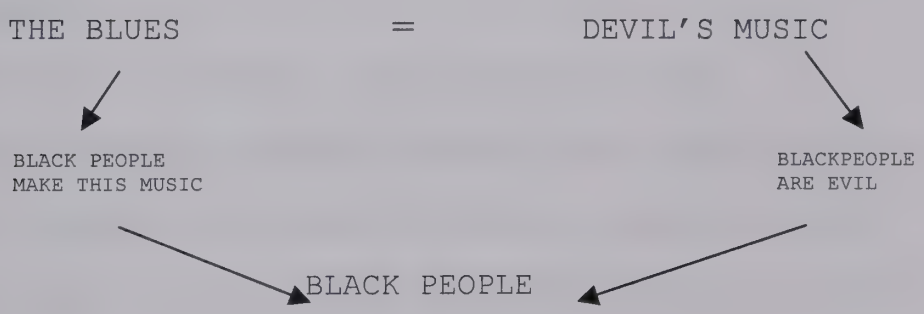


FIGURE 4: Stereotype Logic with Sonic Vehicle - Black



In many sonic stereotypes for which the route to an idea is through blackness, that blackness is often obscured in a way that it is not in visual stereotypes. Even though the sign depends upon both the link between the sonic sign vehicle (i.e.: hip-hop) and the object

(blackness) *and* the object (blackness) and the interpretant (crime), the fact that the object in question is most commonly referenced by visual vehicles (skin, hair, body type) makes it easier to obscure. It becomes possible, therefore, to use sonic sign vehicles to reference ideas associated with black people in stereotypical ways without receiving the kind of critique that visual stereotypes around blackness may receive. Sonic stereotypes associated with blackness, then, are stereotypes for which the object (blackness / black people) is signaled by the presence of sounds and is reduced and fixed to a static position by the discourse surrounding it.

In order to identify a sonic stereotype of blackness, we have to identify sounds associated with blackness. In order to identify sounds associated with blackness, we have to abstract them from the contexts in which they originate. The problem is that these sounds often carry many meanings in their original contexts. Labeling them 'black' does more than allow us to think about how they are associated with Black people. It also cuts away all of the other meanings of the sound. If the sound is musical, for example, defining it as "black" may

allow us to think about how blackness is referenced via the music. However, such an action may also keep us from thinking about references to a particular artist or creative practice, to musical locations and eras and ideologies.

With visual representations there is an assumed link between images associated with blackness (such as dark skin) and references to blackness, so that even when the image itself is abstract (as with the blackface mask) or what it is used to represent is offensive and untrue (such as the idea that blacks are unintelligent), it is not difficult to understand that the representation at hand *intends* to reference black people with the sign vehicles.

With sounds that reference blackness, however, the association with black people is harder to recognize. The sounds that are used to mark blackness are not in or on the body. Even when the sounds (voices, noises, musics) are *from* the body, they are choices, and therefore reading them as "black" may require us to make an argument to understand the link. (i.e.: This music is black because black people have traditionally played it. Or: This speech is black vernacular because black people

have traditionally spoken in this way.) In the moment that we make this argument, we may limit other readings of the sounds in question. (i.e.: This music is the sound of the city. Or: This speech is country people's speech.) Although the ends of the process of identifying a representation of a sound as black in these moments are antithetical to stereotype, the gestures of identification are similar to stereotypical gestures. In fact, in order to identify sonic stereotypes of blackness, we may have to suspend disbelief of the very stereotypes we wish to destroy. As a result of this problem, the attempt to describe the function of sonic racialized symbols is a dance around an ever-elusive object. The apparition of "blackness" that is the reference point of sonic stereotypes slips through every attempt to locate and define it. Like a ghost in the attic, it is "there" when it haunts us and "not there" when we try to exorcise it. Nevertheless, we are out to find a ghost and our first task is to figure out when and how the ghost evades us.

There are three problems that hinder the recognition and analyses of sonic stereotypes. Each of these critical blind spots carries a separate consequence. The most

obvious hindrance to an analysis of sonic stereotype is that race and therefore racial stereotypes are most commonly referenced through visual markers and understood through visual terms. As I argued in the previous chapter, failure to acknowledge systems of representation in audio and other non-visual media keeps those who are concerned about stereotype from recognizing the full field in which racial representation takes place.

The second problem is that most theories of the sign tend to depend on one-to-one correspondence between an object and a stable signifier. Sounds are recognized as part of this system when the sonic signifiers are linguistic, but only because these sounds function in the way that written words function. In language, each sonic signifier has finite limits (as a word). The relationship of each sonic signifier to each object is (understood to be) arbitrary and conventional and therefore symbolic. The recognition of linguistic signs that depend on sound does not extend to other kinds of sonic signifiers, such as musical signifiers.

The third problem is that this slipperiness with sonic signification (which I have identified as problem two) also makes it difficult to *identify* the stereotype

at hand. Stereotypes gain their character as such when the signs 'fix' people into place. If stereotypes are identified by the fixity of the sign's parts and sonic reference is identified by its slipperiness, however, where shall the twain meet? In the following chapter I discuss the problems presented by the attempt to study sonic stereotypes and demonstrate a way in which we might break through these problems in interpretation. I then read the use of sonic stereotypes in the film *Boiler Room* to demonstrate the ability to locate sonic stereotypes in spite of the problems sound presents. In the course of making my reading, I discuss the labeling of music forms as black and the use of off-screen film sound as an area of design.

Understanding The Trouble with Sonic Stereotypes

There are three major problems that hinder our recognition of sonic stereotypes. In brief, they are as follows: (1) Sonic stereotypes challenge the idea of race as visual information. (2) Sonic stereotypes challenge the idea that sound is too slippery to denote objects.

(3) Sonic stereotypes challenge the idea that stereotypes require a static signifier. With each of the problems the study of sonic stereotype presents, the difficulty arises because the differences between image and sound (or looking and listening) are fundamental. The ways in which the task of identifying stereotype are troubled differ from problem to problem. The first difficulty is explained in detail in the previous chapter. **(1) Sonic stereotypes challenge the idea that race is visual information and racial representation is a visual problem.** In most discussions about being a raced subject, race becomes an issue when an element of a person's race is *seen*.

In the essay "The Fact of Blackness", Franz Fanon lists a number of stereotypes of blackness "The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly . . ." All of these characteristics are then associated with an image, that of a shivering black man. It is his appearance that causes the white child in that scene to fear and loathe him. In this scene, Fanon's facts (of blackness) are images. Even beyond this text, visual signs, especially color, but also facial features and hair textures, are the primary way through which we

commonly represent and understand racial markers. Although we sometimes acknowledge that we *experience* racial difference through sound and sonic representation, most people simply are not accustomed to thinking critically about sonic signs as racial markers. In order to identify sonic racial stereotypes, we have to acknowledge that race is recognized through more than visual means.

Another reason why sonic racial stereotypes are not critically engaged to a greater degree is that sound is a sloppy signifier. As such, **(2) sonic stereotypes challenge the idea that sound is too slippery to denote objects.** While sonic elements of the sign are commonly understood to be part of linguistic signs, their status as signifiers is only stable because the ability of sounds to refer is stabilized by language. When other kinds of sounds (such as musics and noises) are considered, many critics have argued that it is still language that gives them meaning. For example, listener might find that Rimskij-Korsakov's "The Flight of the Bumblebee" sounds like a bumblebee in flight. However, the listener's ability to understand the bumblebee as a

reference of the sound (of the music) has everything to do with knowing the song's title.

As Michael Chanan argues in his book *From Handel to Hendrix*, "music has very considerable referential powers, but they function entirely on the plane of connotation, and this makes them slippery and elusive" (147). Following Roman Jakobson's model of communication, Chanan discusses music's emotive, conative, phatic, and poetic functions. When it comes to the area of communication that Jakobson calls "referential," however, communication is directed towards the context, the area of denotation. For Chanan, one thing that makes it difficult to think of music as referential is that it "has no means of denotation" (141).

He identifies the simplest type of musical reference as "ostensive reference", so named because the signified exists in the same medium as the signifier: sound. Chanan's description of musical references to other sounds in European music leads to his argument that "for a musical sound to designate a non-musical sound at least the context must be articulate . . . some kind of semantic domination, however slight, is necessary to tell you what kind of thing you are supposed to be hearing"

(148.) If a musical sound requires articulate contexts (such as titles or genres) to signify other sounds, how can we begin to trace musical references to objects in other media?

One of the ways in which Michael Chanan answers this question is by considering the conventions regarding "musical icons". As with visual icons, for which the signifier refers to the signified through recognition of likeness, musical icons are pieces of music in which units of sound reference sound objects by way of sharing sonic features. Chanan notes that musical imitation "has always followed pre-established musical conventions" (148.) He is not alone in this observation.

In an article about studying music beyond the confines of musicological boundaries entitled "Popular Music Studies", John Shepherd also notes the existence of musical icons that depend on convention to give their likeness to other sounds meaning. He writes:

> . . . no music — not even the most rhythmic, the most textural on the one hand, or the most abstract, the most 'syntactical,' on the other—is without a range of meanings that

> have become conventional, traditional, and, to a certain degree, arbitrary in relation to the iconic potentials and possibilities of the sounds through which it receives articulation and life . . . (29).

That there is sometimes a context in which a listener can recognize one sound as imitative of another means that the same conventions can prepare a listener to hear a sound as representative of an idea (such as femininity), event (such as a birthday), place (such as a city street), movement (such as the cue to stand in a wedding march), or person/animal (such as in the theme to *Jaws*). As such, music can be used to reference anything associated with these things—such as beauty, joy, excitement, respect, and danger, for example.

When it comes to musical signs, the conventions that instruct the interpretations of the signs are upfront. With visual signs, the ability to "read" the sign often does not seem conventional or arbitrary. The ability to read the icon known in English as a "no smoking sign" as saying "do not smoke here" seems to be a simple matter of *seeing* the cigarette and the red circle with a bar

through it. Our *ability* to see a slim rectangle and squiggly lines as a smoking cigarette and a red circle with a bar through it as a sign that something is prohibited, however, is as conventional as knowing what steps to take when dancing to a mambo.

One major difference, however, is that one's ability to read visual signs often seems to take place in the absence of cultural cues while one's ability to read musical signs often seems cultivated. Compounding this difference is the fact that the cultural conventions that allow us to read visual signs are often cross-cultural, shared by people from different national and linguistic contexts. This is the case with the no-smoking icon, which is international. Musical signs, on the other hand, are often specific to national or local cultures from which they originate. Even when music cultures span creative communities and audiences, they can refer to a particular context. Many people around the world listen to mambo, for example, but the music may also make the listener think of Cuba (specifically) or Latin America (in general), regardless of that listener's community or location.

The element of time also marks a difference between visual and sonic signs. While viewers can look at individual images frozen in time, musical signs are time-based. Sound exists only in movement. The fact that sonic representations are time-based makes it difficult to distinguish the beginning of one sound from the ending of another. It stands to reason that what one person considers to be one sound may be understood by another as many sounds. The fact that a sound changes over time affects the listener's ability to pin down the signifying material.

This phenomenon makes it hard to locate any object of that sound. While for some listeners the unit of sound to "read" could be a note, for others it might be a melody. For still others, the unit of sound to "read" could be a later static simultaneous with the recording of a note. It all depends on the purpose of the reading and the ability of the listener to hear (tones, familiar melodies, audio production, etc.) In each case, it is convention that allows us to hear repeated sounds as repeated, and, therefore, as meaningful. Thus, in order to identify sonic racial stereotypes, we have to

acknowledge that sound can denote meaning within contexts that share conventions.

These differences are complicated further by the fact that the slipperiness of sonic representation not only troubles traditional notions of the sign, it also troubles traditional notions of stereotype. This brings us to the third problem with recognizing sonic stereotypes. **(3) Sonic stereotypes challenge the idea that stereotypes require a static signifier.** How can listeners agree that they have found a sonic stereotype of blackness if sonic reference is too slippery to denote an object?

The gaze is an important part of this process of stereotyping because color, hair texture (as a feature that can be seen), eye shape, and bone structure are visual signs used to link characters to bodies via social myths. Part of the reason that these links carry so much weight is that visual signs can be read in freeze frame. Even if they reference different objects at different times, the images themselves are static or able to be made static; even moving pictures are critically read frame by frame. As such, visual representations lend themselves to reductions. This process is especially

loaded for race because the reductions can be (and often are) extended to many different situations and used as a convention. When reductive readings of race are made into conventions, the visual representation becomes a marker for a widespread belief about a group of people that limits their presence to a set of proscribed meanings, in other words, a stereotype.

When it comes to sound, locating the unit of sound to "read" and the object of that sound is much more difficult. If one is looking at images and looking for stereotypes, one can easily trace repeated appearances of the same sign. This is a move that Marlon Riggs makes in *Ethnic Notions* when he traces the use of stereotypes of black figures from movie to movie. The theorists interviewed in the documentary make note of what they "see" today in television and film and how it relates to earlier images, but although sounds are often recycled from text to text, we do not have established conventions for reading the unit of sound that is repeated. Should we read five seconds of a sound? The presentation of an entire song? Should we read the texture of a voice? Of a production of a particular recording of a song?

Sounds can be used to reduce human characters to racial myths in similar ways to (or in concert with) images. Although sound moves and although music is often associated with a type of freedom that is antithetical to stereotype, racialized sounds can also function to pin down (or 'fix') characters in narratives. In order to be able to read the work of sonic stereotypes of blackness we must consider the ways in which sounds differ from image in their work as signifying material. We must also consider the ability of sonic signifying materials that point to many objects or reference objects in indirect ways to nevertheless affix a reductive character to individuals and groups of people associated with those sounds.

THE SONIC CONTRUCTION OF STEREOTYPES

All of the stereotypes I discuss in this project involve a process. At some points I reference the **sonic construction of stereotypes**. In these moments, I mean to highlight the process by which the stereotype is understood rather than the singular experience we tend to

associate with stereotypes and other signs. In other words, the phrase "sonic construction of stereotypes" in my writing is always a reference to the role sounds play in different moments of stereotypical logic. There are two main ways in which the sonic construction of stereotypes comes into play. First, there are stereotypes that depend on sound for their manifestation. In these cases, sounds are the primary (in some cases, the only) means by which black presence is invoked. In the next chapter ("Is The Audience Listening?") I discuss the use of hip-hop to invoke ideas associated with black people in the film *Boiler Room*. In most of the scenes I examine, there are no images of black people; there are only sounds associated with black people.

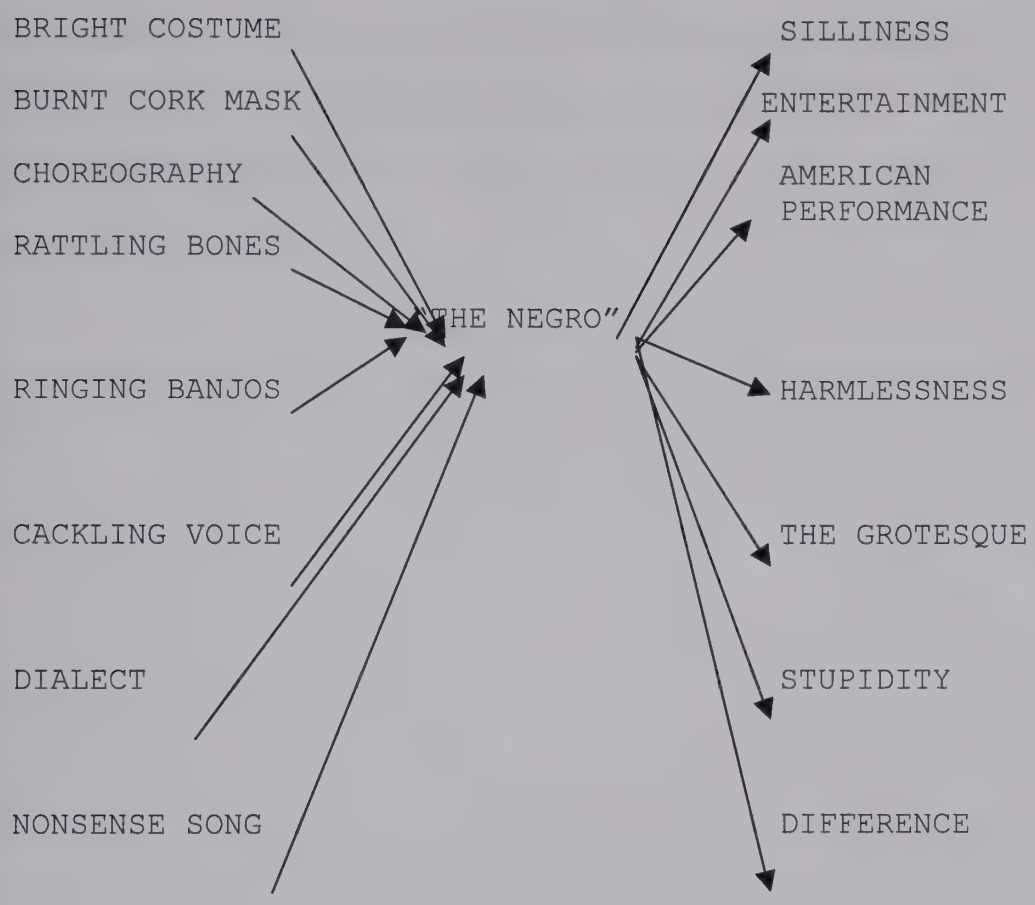
The stereotypes audiences encounter are **sonic stereotypes** because it is only by attending to the sounds and the meanings they invoke or provoke that one can acknowledge that stereotype is at work. When I write about the sonic construction of these stereotypes, I am referencing the way that sounds function in the making of meaning. For other kinds of stereotypes where the vehicles for the signs include images, however, sound may also play a role in the construction.

In his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ralph W. Ellison writes the following words:

> In the Anglo-Saxon branch of American folklore and in the entertainment industry (which thrives on the exploitation and debasement of all folk materials), the Negro is reduced to a sign that usually appears in a comedy of the grotesque and the unacceptable . . . the action of the early minstrel show—with its Negro-deprived choreography, its ringing of banjos and rattling of bones, its voices cackling jokes in pseudo-Negro dialect, with its nonsense songs, its bright costumes and sweating performers—constituted a ritual of exorcism (48).

Ellison continues to discuss the costume of the minstrel (the red, white, and blue outfit that invokes the idea of America as well as the burnt cork mask) but in the passage above, we understand that images (here: choreography and costume) and perhaps smells (as the performers are sweating) work in concert with sounds -- the ringing, rattling, and cackling, the dialect and songs -- to construct the stereotype.

FIGURE 5: Diagram of Minstrel Show Elements



Ellison addresses sound as having an important role in the construction of the stereotype, but his attention to the stereotype's vehicles also recognizes the other kinds of materials that make the sign's meaning. To write of the sonic construction of this kind of stereotype is to emphasize the way that sounds work in concert with images and other materials to fix the object (in this

case, "the Negro") in a dehumanizing position for the purposes of representing an idea. When I write of the sonic construction of stereotypes, I am referring to the role of sound in the making of stereotypes that wholly depend on sound to be recognized as well as to the role of sound in the making of stereotypes for which sound is only a part.

Is the Audience Listening?
Acousmatic Blackness in *Boiler Room*

> [T]he social reception of music and the uses to which it is put may also bring to it iconic and ideological meanings which are strange, sometimes alien, even contradictory.
>
> "Semiotics in Question" Michael Chanan

> However deformed, incorporated, and inauthentic are the forms in which black people and black communities and traditions appear and are represented in culture, we continue to see, in the figures and repertoires on which popular culture draws, the experiences that stand behind them.
>
> "What is This Black in Black Popular Culture?" Stuart Hall

One thing we learn from ghost stories is that no one believes in ghosts as much as the ghosts themselves. Even those who are haunted by them have their doubts. When a haunted person tries to find the source of the rattling chain or the voice calling her name, she cannot find it. She may see a light or a body moving from far away, but when she arrives at the spot in question, she can find nothing there.

Sometimes ghosts are all sound, which means (in the logic of the story) that they are not real. Sometimes even the sound is elusive. Most characters cannot hear it and those who can are known to be crazy. Ghosts know how

to call attention to themselves. They know when to shut up. Most of all, they know how to not get caught. Ghosts are indefinable; they can be felt but will not be pinned down.

Sonic stereotypes haunt in this same way. They lurk in the shadows of the threads of narratives we can easily see and dissect. From a distance we may feel their presence, but when we 'approach' these stereotypes, they disappear. The elements of character that limit the development of raced types through sound slip through our hands. In the process of pinning down the reference points of sonic stereotypes, we risk limiting the interpretations of creative practices. Although the ends of this process are antithetical to stereotype, the gestures of identification are similar to stereotypical gestures. In fact, in order to identify sonic stereotypes of blackness, we may have to suspend disbelief of the very stereotypes we wish to destroy. As a result, the attempt to describe the function of sonic racialized symbols is a dance around an ever-elusive object. The apparition of 'blackness' that is the reference point of sonic stereotypes slips through every attempt to locate and define it. Like a ghost in the attic, it is 'there'

when it haunts us and 'not there' when we try to exorcise it. Nevertheless, we are out to find a ghost and our first task is to figure out when and how the ghost evades us.

Sonic Blackness Off-screen

In film theory, the distinctions between what parts of the action happen onscreen and off-screen are distinctions that push along the narrative in crucial ways. According to Alfred Hitchcock, each film narrative has a secret that must be unfolded to both the characters and the spectators. The director of the film must decide whether the characters in question know more than the spectator, whether the spectators know more than the characters, or whether the spectators and the characters have the same amount of information. If the director decides to show the characters more information than the spectators, s/he is creating suspense. If the director decides to show the characters less information than the spectators, s/he is creating surprise. If the director decides to show the characters and the spectators equal information, s/he is creating mystery.

In each case, it is the disparity of knowledge between the characters and the spectators that creates a specific kind of narration. This narration is often discussed as a product of the moving images, which reveal information to some people and keep it hidden from others. In film sound theory, however, this disparity of knowledge is also given shape through sound. When it comes to film sound, the distinctions between those sounds which are made onscreen and those which are made off-screen give spectators (or audiences) different kinds of access to the source of the sound. If the audience does not know the source of a sound, the sound can be evidence of the disparity of knowledge between the audience and the character or the audience and the true story.

There is also a category of sound information that does not correspond to images. Because the story of each film is told primarily through images, all images are part of the story-world. When it comes to sound, however, there is the possibility of including sounds that are simultaneous with the story in presentation but are understood to be outside of the story-world. Sounds that are within the story-world are representations of events

in that world: conversations the audience can see or overhear, music being played onscreen or off, and even bumps in the attic for which the source is unknown. Sounds that are from outside of the story-world may nevertheless comment on it. These sounds include soundtrack music, underscoring, and some voiceovers.

Film sound theorist Michel Chion has given names to each of these kinds of sound. **Diegetic sound** is a term to describe sound which exists in the story world. **Non-diegetic sound** is film term to describe sound that communicates only with the audience - such as the score, voice-over narration, certain sound effects, and underscoring. **Acousmatic sound** is sound for which the source is not visualized. In film, acousmatic sound is also called "off-screen sound". Acousmatic sound may be diegetic or non-diegetic. Audio media can also be acousmatic, when characterized by users' engagements with sounds in the absence of the image of their sources. Such is the case with radio, telephone, and much of recorded media. There is also "acousmatic music", a term coined by composer Francis Bayle, which Michel Chion defines as "concert music that is made for a recorded medium,

intentionally eliminating the possibility of seeing the sounds' initial causes".

Visualized sound is sound for which the source is visualized. "Visualized sound" is also called "direct sound" by composer and sound theorist Pierre Schaeffer. In film, any sound that accompanies an image intended as the source may be considered visualized sound, even if the sound has actually been recorded separately. Although it seems strange to do so, one could also use "visualized sound" to refer to sounds for which the source is seen in everyday life.

Readings of race in film tend to depend on readings of images both because film is understood as a visual medium and because race is understood as occurring (as Stuart Hall once put it) "in the field of vision" in everyday life (in Julien). Even in everyday life, however, we experience race (or blackness in particular) through sound, sometimes through acousmatic media. A brief story will demonstrate the ways in which acousmatic media can create a disparity of knowledge between the listener and the being surrounded by a raced narrative in everyday life.

The story is about me and involves a confession: I am looking for ways to trace the cultural associations of black music forms in part because in addition to being a teacher and critic of African-American literature and Sound Theory, I am a black artist who writes narratives for audio recordings, which I also perform. My work in sound art and net art is largely a collaborative effort with my husband, Keith Obadike, who is also a composer and sound designer for theater. Our recent collaborations are often about race.

Because most of these projects are accessed on audio recordings available via CD or on the Internet, our relationship to the race-related ideas or racialized utterances is not always easily readable to members of our audience, especially if they know nothing about us. The experience of being listened to and heard in this way—through acousmatic media—has taught me a great deal about the sonic language of race. This language operates in somewhat subtle ways, because our understanding of how race is verified is often dependent upon visual terms. Seeing, when it comes to race, really is believing. But there are other kinds of beliefs or at least assumptions that carry weight in our cultural readings and have

significance in the realm of representations of race in the field of sound.

For example, in some of my earlier audio works with Keith, the racial content of the narrative was not very up front. Our music was acoustic; he played guitar and I sang. Hearing this work, my cousin (a black listener) made the comment: "You sound like Suzanne Vega". In response to the same piece of music, a colleague of Keith's who was a stranger to me heard our music and asked Keith: "What race is your wife?"

What was my cousin hearing that made her think that I sounded like Suzanne Vega? Was it a matter of vocal style? Melody? Tone? Texture? Was it a shock to her? Was my singing voice different from my speaking voice? Or was there something about listening to my voice come from the studio monitors that was different from listening to my voice come from my mouth? And what made her *comment* that I sounded like Suzanne Vega? What was she trying to tell me? Was this something-that-warranted-comment a function of the technology involved? Was it Mendi-sound plus microphone-sound plus the sound of the room and speakers? Or was it the abstraction of my voice from my image? Was my cousin saying: *You sound like someone on the radio*?

Or: *You sound like someone white*? Or: *You sound like someone white on the radio*?

Would my husband's colleague have asked his question ("What race is your wife?") if he had been listening to me sing as he watched me? If I had been there in person? On video? What did he think he could or could not tell about race through sound? More specifically, what ideas about race did sound or his act of listening trigger? Without more information, which even the cousin and the colleague might not be able to provide, it is hard to know whether their responses were responses to vocal style, the style of the music, to the sound of the mix, or to the fact that the voice was abstracted from the image.

In any case, the fact is that the experience of a sound as separate from the image of making that sound can produce a different kind of attention to the experience of race than an experience of sounds as connected to the image of their making. The very possibility that one could read race through sound differently when one does not see a sound being made (on a recording, over the phone, etc.) brings us to the question of acousmatic blackness.

If we are able to consider the ways in which race occurs in the field of sound, we will understand that film sound, even as a "secondary design" of the medium, has much to teach us about race in film. 'Reading' a film in which most of the representations of blackness are acousmatic and non-diegetic enables us to trace the ways in which sound works both with and against images to create a narrative about race.

Acousmatic sound, as has been established, is sound made by an unseen source. Michel Chion discusses the ways in which acousmatic situations arise in film in his essay "The Audiovisual Scene":

> In a film, an acousmatic situation can develop along two different scenarios: either a sound is visualized first, and subsequently acousmatized, or it is acousmatic to start with, and is visualized only afterward. The first case associates a sound with a precise image from the outset. This image can then reappear with greater or lesser directness in the spectator's mind each time the sound is heard acousmatically. It will be an "embodied" sound,

identified with an image, demythologized, classified.

Chion goes on to explain that acousmatic sound can be part of the plot, as with films in which characters hear and interact with the voice of God or the voices of ghosts. For other types of acousmatic sound, however, the fact that the sound sources are off-screen may be insignificant in the storyline. This is often true when the sound is non-diegetic, but it may even be true when the sound exists in the story world, such as when a character is listening to the radio or hears a television from the next room.

But non-diegetic acousmatic sound can also communicate a great deal of information about the story, and this information can take many different forms. It can even communicate information that is usually associated with visual signs when the sound sources are never visualized or (as Chion would put it) de-acousmatized.

Though Chion acknowledges that it is possible for acousmatic sound to remain acousmatic in film (especially when it is non-diegetic), his focus in "The Audio-visual

scene" is on the relationship of acousmatic sounds to sound for which the sources are visualized at some point in the film. My own project here involves sounds from a film in which their sound sources are racialized and never visualized. My argument, here, is that in making cultural readings of sonic texts it is important to understand the cultural signifiers of sounds in the absence of the images of their production as well as in conjunction with them.

Case in Point: *Boiler Room*

In brief, the story of *Boiler Room* is as follows: When the story opens, Seth Davis (the protagonist, played by Giovanni Ribisi) has dropped out of college and is running an illegal casino out of the house in which he lives. His father, who is a judge, finds out and threatens to disown him. By chance, an old acquaintance who is now a stockbroker drops by the casino one night and lures Seth into the business. Seth, who longs for his father's approval, decides to leave the illegal gambling

business for what appears to be a more respectable position in the brokerage firm.

Seth takes to the firm, J. T. Marlin, like a duck to water. He makes lots of money and almost loses himself in a world of brutal capitalism where the brokers scam the naive but (supposedly) rich, spend voraciously, and fight. While the fantasy is still fresh, however, Seth begins to discover problems in the system - the brokers make more money from their commissions than the law allows; every client seems to lose money on every stock the firm sells; all of the stocks J. T. Marlin brokers sell have the same investors; and the list continues.

The official rules of trade are all broken in this company. By the time Seth begins to question the ethics of his company and of his own actions within the system, he has already broken his own code of ethics. He has also become attached to two members of the firm. One is the firm's secretary Abbie (played by Nia Long), who is Seth's girlfriend and the only black character in the film. The other is Chris Varick (played by Vin Diesel),

another broker who looks after Seth's best interest and teaches him the rules of the game.[5]

Boiler Room is in many ways a typical Hollywood, New York film. There are shots of the skyline, shots of bridges at night, scenes in restaurants and bars. There is an enemy at work as well as a love interest. There are jokes on Midwesterners. The film has alternately been considered an homage to and an imitation of other popular films about young businessmen, such as Gordon Gekko's film *Wall Street* and David Mamet's play (and later, film) *Glenngary, Glen Ross*—both of which are mentioned by name in *Boiler Room*. However, this film also attempts to do something untraditional in its treatment of race.

On a visual level, the film attempts to undermine some assumptions about white collar crime and also, I argue, about white, middle class stockbrokers by showing them to be crass, ruthless, and violent. The main message of *Boiler Room* is: *Scamming people for money is violent and spending more than you make is wasteful, even if your*

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[5] The irony is that Chris Varick is played by Vin Diesel, who is Black and Italian. The film, however, depicts J. T. Marlin as an environment in which the characters constantly hurl racial slurs at one another. Varick receives slurs about his Italian identity, but never about a Black identity. As such, the film directs us to understand his role in J. T. Marlin (and therefore in the film) as Italian *and not Black*.

money comes from having a respectable job associated with upper class white people. The problem with this film is that it depends heavily on notions of poor black men as the standard of crass, ruthless, violent wastefulness to make this point. Because black men are completely absent from the film as characters in the visual narrative, however, we have to recognize the other forms through which a blackness of this type can be referenced. In the case of *Boiler Room* the reference to notions of poor black men as violent and wasteful comes through the use of hip-hop. 'Acousmatic blackness' functions throughout the film as a kind of sonic skin, a comment on the brute nature of hard-core capitalism and this particular group of white stockbrokers, but it is also seen as a link to other representations of black people.

(How) Does Hip-Hop Reference Blackness?

In an essay on cross-over music entitled "Black Popular Music: Crossing Over or Going Under?" Reebee Garofalo recounts an argument from Nelson George's book on similar issues, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*. George argues that the term 'race music' is an accurate way to

describe "working class, rural black music" because, despite arguments that the term limits social meaning of the creative expressions of black musicians, black leaders used "race" to define themselves.

Garofalo puts this argument in the context of other writing about cross-over music that perceives attempts to "color" the social meaning of musical forms in racial terms:

> . . . [I]n viewing rhythm and blues as the music of 'the race', isn't George reuniting the terms race and culture in a way that would be an anathema - indeed, racist - to the social scientists? Perhaps not. Perhaps George is implying that what we call 'black culture' is so intimately connected to the experience of slavery and subsequent oppression that it is necessarily linked to the struggles of a particular racial group, not on the basis of their genetic characteristics, but because of their shared social experience. Perhaps, because of these particular socio-historical experiences, there is simply an unusual degree

> of fit between race and culture in the case of black popular music. In any case, the point to be made is that it is not always so easy to separate race from cultures . . . (236, 237).

Garofalo continues to point out that the idea that it is the experience (of black people) that makes black music and not the familiar sounds therefore puts in question the acceptance of white artist George Michael on black radio. At the center of the concerns through which Garofalo and George and a host of other thinkers have been thinking is the question of whether the decisive factors linking specific music and musical forms to races and/or cultures is a matter of the common circumstances of production or simply a matter of common sounds in the production.

Some theorists argue that giving credence to these links is the wrong way to think about music altogether. Anthropologist Stephen Feld, for example, claims that racial categorization has no place in discussions of music: "There are no 'racial' cultures or musics," he writes, "The only people who use such terminology are racists who thinly wrap their ideology in an appeal to

dubious sociobiology . . . Invocation of 'racial' bases of culture serves racism and little else." (235). Feld is not alone in this thinking. In response to a presentation of my own concerns regarding the use of hip-hop in *Boiler Room* as a representation sonic stereotype, musician Anthony Braxton once remarked, "Sound has no color". Braxton was not objecting to the problem I was identifying; his concern was that identifying sound as a racial marker might limit the meaning of any given creative expression.

Although the belief that race is a determining factor for the kind of sound that a being makes does not help the music itself, this idea does exist and it affects the conditions under which music is made. It also affects the ways in which music is marketed and the ways in which it is used in narratives of many sorts. Another problem, which Reebee Garofalo also notes, is that ideas about culture and race (where race is an historical category identified by characteristics linked to biology) are conflated. For Garofalo, the way to get around this problem in critical conversations in which the *idea* of race is an important factor in cultural production is to

use a term that addresses the social life of these ideas about biology.

Arguing that beliefs about biological determinism have an effect on the lived experiences of musicians and audiences, he invokes the social scientists' term "social race" rather than doing away with "race" altogether: "While the term race has clearly eluded precise biological definition," he writes, "it persists as an ever-changing social construct. Thus, the importance of race lies in the social meaning we attach to it." (235) In discussions about race music or raced music, however, even the social meanings we attach to ideas about race may differ depending on whether we are focusing on the production or the reception of the music.

Like many other US American music forms for which the creative practice has originated in black communities, hip-hop has enjoyed crossover success by white artists. White hip-hop artists such as Vanilla Ice, The Beastie Boys, and Ermine have had a different kind of career from popular black artists in the field. The Beastie Boys were played in rock radio markets as well as black/urban radio markets when their album *Licensed to Ill* was released in the 80s. Vanilla Ice made more money

than any other hip-hop act when his album was released. Ermine is the only hip-hop artist to have ever won an Oscar for his music. At their highest moments in hip-hop each of these groups were able to achieve heights that black artists in the field had not achieved. Many black listeners (even those who were fans of The Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice, and Ermine) have been critical of the way the presence of white listeners has shaped the field of hip-hop, as it appears that the numbers of white fans of white artists gives white artists an inordinate amount of influence on hip-hop.

Unlike black musicians in the blues (for example), black musicians in hip-hop have also enjoyed an unprecedented amount of crossover success. Hip-hop by black artists has come to the forefront of American popular music. Black producers such as Russell Simmons and Sean Combs have not only benefited financially; they have also become figures on the American cultural scene. As these artists have gained more success in mainstream (read: white) popular music, there has been an increasingly loud argument against defining hip-hop as a black musical form. Tricia Rose defines the problem in the following way:

> For many cultural critics, once a black cultural practice takes a prominent place inside the commodity system, it is no longer considered a black practice—it is instead a 'popular' practice whose black cultural priorities and distinctively black approaches are either taken for granted as a 'point of origin,' an isolated 'technique,' or rendered invisible (83).

With hip-hop, however, Tricia Rose has found that this process of distancing the blackness surrounding the origins of the music has taken a different turn. Although she has found that "the category 'dance' music has been a particularly slippery space in which black music has been linked to technological effects rather than black cultural priorities," she has also found that rendering the black cultural priorities and distinctively black approaches of hip-hop invisible was "a virtually impossible position to take in reference to rap music" (84).

For Rose, what has made it impossible for black concerns and approaches to the music to disappear in hip-hop is the fact that the hip-hop of that time was heavily associated with a black politics. The musical political climate of 1992 (when *Black Noise* was published) was such that one could not easily separate the *sounds* of hip-hop (heavy baselines, scratching, the Funky Drummer cadence, etc.) from the concerns about black politics consistently expressed in the music. At that time, Public Enemy's *Fear of A Black Planet* was one of the most popular hip-hop albums. Including songs such as "Brothers Gonna Work It Out" (about ending black-on-black crime), "911 Is A Joke" (about the lack of police protection in black communities), and "Burn Hollywood Burn" (about rejecting negative representations of black people in Hollywood), *Fear of A Black Planet* was understood as a black project because it was *about* the concerns affecting black people as well as made by black people.

In *Black Noise*, Rose makes a close reading of politically explicit lyrics and images in Public Enemy's song "Night of the Living Baseheads". According to Rose, this song is a critique of "the government, the police, the media, and the black bourgeoisie". This critique,

argues Rose, is grounded in a culture that is "both black and masculine", but which considers race a "shared category of oppression" that is "articulated from a male perspective" (105).

Though Public Enemy was the best known of hip-hop artists making political messages in their work, they were by no means alone. Other groups such as Poor Righteous Teachers, KRS-One, and Sistah Souljah were also offering similar messages about issues that affected black people in their songs. During the late eighties and early nineties, even artists whose main purpose was not to be 'message artists' (such as Ice-T) understood hip-hop as a vehicle through which to talk about concerns affecting black people. Ice-T's controversial album *F*ck the Police* was understood as a statement against police brutality in black neighborhoods and as a statement coming from a black artist.

In the early nineties, the blackness of hip-hop was not understood in purely racial terms. The blackness of hip-hop was mostly considered a cultural matter associated with Black people. In *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*, Houston Baker argues that understanding the popular cultural form known as "rap" requires that one

understand the "historic variables" and "sonic registers" of the form. It is not enough to understand rap simply as "a black male expressive form". Nevertheless, Baker finds that the misunderstandings of the function of rap in events such as the Central Park jogger incident and the LA Insurrection are due to an ignorance of such historic variables and sonic registers. He finds that this ignorance is "a willed refusal fully to engage a form that is preeminently young, black, and male" (61).

This young black masculinity takes many shapes. As both Juan Flores and Paul Gilroy argue (in their books *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* and *The Black Atlantic*, respectively) the blackness of hip-hop has often been miscast as African-American. Flores and Gilroy make the claim that the roots of the genre owe much to the influence of Puerto Rican and Jamaican artists working in the United States, but that discussions about the history of hip-hop tend to have amnesia about the Caribbean roots of the form. Their concerns about the blackness of hip-hop are with the cultural practices and the conditions under which black artists with Caribbean ancestry made the music. Both Flores and Gilroy wish to expand the popular understanding about the nature of hip-hop's

blackness, but both do take the blackness of hip-hop for granted.

Since the emergence of Eminem and the greater influence of the music and language of hip-hop on popular culture in the United States and across the world, however, the idea of hip-hop as a black musical form has been in question like never before. The place of blackness in hip-hop has been questioned by non-black artists who are hip-hop artists, but it has also been questioned by black hip-hop artists who see their practice as connecting young people, city dwellers, and beat lovers across the world. Still others desire to make distance between the idea of hip-hop and the idea of blackness because the music has become associated with violence and wastefulness.

Unlike the late eighties and early nineties, in which time Rose, Baker, Flores, and Gilroy wrote on hip-hop, the sounds (and costumes) of hip-hop have becomes the sounds (and images) of American popular music. Today, as a music with mainstream popular appeal, many artists and cultural critics have attempted to claim hip-hop as a part of urban culture or as a part of youth culture, but not as a clearly (solely) black musical form.

Nevertheless, as a *symbol*, hip-hop continues to represent black people. This symbolic use of hip-hop as a reference of blackness can be seen at work in the film *Boiler Room*.

How Does Hip-Hop Reference Blackness in *Boiler Room*?

The presence of hip-hop in *Boiler Room* can be traced through musical sound and language. The most obvious use of hip-hop is the source music for the soundtrack. The soundtrack includes songs by artists such as De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Erik B. and Rakim, and Pharoah Monch. All are well-known artists; all are black and male. During the film proper, most of the songs from the soundtrack were popular about ten years before the story takes place. This fact does not change much about the point I am making at this moment - the music is hip-hop and associated with black people - however I will return to it later, because the reason for the disconnect in the era of the music and the era of the story is related to issue of stereotype.

In the form of songs from the soundtrack and the score, hip-hop is present throughout the entire film. Hip-hop underscores all of the dramatic scenes in *Boiler*

Room, but it is also used in transitions that are not particularly important to the narrative. I will discuss the use of hip-hop in both scenes that are crucial to the narrative and in those that are seemingly insignificant to the plot in order to think through the meaning of the whole sound design.

Immediately following scene one, in which the brokers from J. T. Marlin exit their tour bus and go on a rampage throughout the hotel, we see a montage of shots of New York City. The first image is of two black boys playing on rocks on a shore against the Manhattan skyline in the background. Following this image are images of the World Trade Center, the Brooklyn Bridge, and other images of the city.

Against these images the audience hears a sample from a song by Rakim in which a voice hypes up a crowd with the words, "If you was born in New York City let me hear say You know that!" To which the crowd responds: "YOU KNOW THAT!" Following this sound, we hear DJ scratching moving in time with spliced images of New York. This is followed by the sound of a soul singer singing the words: "I was born in New York City". Cut in

this mix are samples from various hip-hop songs in which the rapper says "New York" or "New York City".

This audio montage then is faded into a cut up version of De La Soul's song "Area," a song about area codes, many of which are in New York City. This song plays longer than the other samples and coincides with images of characters in the film walking up the steps to Seth Davis' Queens apartment. Once inside the apartment, we see that it has been converted into a casino. The music continues to play in the background, beneath the dialogue in the casino. Throughout the movie, hip-hop by recognizable artists plays in the casino.

This first transition sets the scene. We see images of New York. We hear songs about New York. The pace of the images and sounds is up-beat and complements the idea of New York. The use of hip-hop seems to be a matter of style, an accompaniment to the use of visual montage. It is also a matter of place; the particular rhythms and accents and artists of the hip-hop used here are New York rhythms, accents, and artists.

Another use of hip-hop in the film is the score, which was composed by a musician by the name of The Angel. It is much trickier to identify this music as hip-

hop or as signifying material that references blackness for several reasons. One important reason is that this music was created for *Boiler Room* and does not have an official market designation outside of film music. This music is all instrumental; as hip-hop music is usually associated with rhyming (also called 'rapping'), the score of *Boiler Room* would likely not be considered hip-hop were it to play on the radio outside of the context of the film.

However, in recent years, several artists who sing R&B, such as Erykah Badu, D'Angelo, and Lauren Hill, have made a place for understanding a hip-hop *aesthetic*. For these artists, what is 'hip-hop' about their music is in the production—the use of drum machine cadences commonly found in hip-hop (namely The Funky Drummer), the self-conscious presence of the DJ (made audible through effects such as sampling and scratching), the rhythms of the language layered over them, the attitudes expressed through the language, and the relationship of the heavy bass lines to the higher end sounds in the mix.

Aside from the parts of this aesthetic that have to do with language, The Angel's score is in conversation with hip-hop. Through scratching, using cadences common

in hip-hop, and placing heavy, repetitive basslines against high-pitched horn lines, the music from the *Boiler Room* score continues the style of the music from the soundtrack. The Angel often describes her music community as the "electronic music" or "dance music" communities, but she is also identified as a 'hip-hop artist' and even her albums made under another name (60 Channels) have been categorized as hip-hop. (THE ANGEL, *Pinknoises*)

The Angel's score also registers as hip-hop because of two references to hip-hop in the opening section of *Boiler Room*, which is the third way in which hip-hop makes a presence in the film. Before the narrative begins, there are standard film industry gestures, including a disclaimer announcing that all characters in the film are fictional and the presentation of the logo and theme music for New Line Cinema. Immediately after this presentation and before the narrative proper, there is a remix of the New Line Cinema logo and theme song in which the main image of the logo is replaced by the faces of Presidents Franklin, Grant, Jefferson, Washington, and others from different bill denominations. During this transformation, the New Line Cinema theme song is also

remixed so that the images of presidents change simultaneously with the sounds of DJ scratching. According to The Angel, director Ben Younger directed her sounds with the words, "Mess it up, girl, scratch it, do what you have to do . . ." (DVD composer's commentary)

Although the score is sonically in conversation with a hip-hop aesthetic, the way in which the film uses hip-hop most prominently has more to do with contextual cues in the narrative than with sound. The very first words uttered in the film link the sonic, linguistic, and visual narratives and the other relationships simply resonate throughout the film. The film opens with a shot of a stretch of open road lined by trees and the night sky. As the audience watches the unchanging scene, it hears the following words, in the voice of Giovanni Ribisi (playing Seth), underscored by a few bleeps and synthesizer pads from The Angel's sparse track:

> I read this article a while back. It said that Microsoft employs more millionaire secretaries than any other company in the world. They chose stock options over Christmas bonuses. It was a good move. I remember there was this photo of

one of the groundskeepers standing next to his Ferrari. You see shit like this and you just can't see. Makes you think it's possible, even easy. And you turn on the TV and there's just more of it. The 87 million dollar lottery winner. That kid actor who just made 20 million on his last movie. The Internet stock that shot through the roof. You could have made millions off it if you just got in early. And that's exactly what I wanted to do. Get in.

At this point in the monologue, a bassline and beat drops in and Ribisi's speech speeds up. The energy of the monologue increases and there is a sense of urgency in the following words:

I didn't want to be an innovator. I just wanted to make the quick, easy buck. I just wanted in. Notorious BIG said it best: "Either you're slinging crack or you got a wicked jump shot". Nobody wants to work for it anymore. There's no honor in taking that after school job at Mickey D's. Honor's in the dollar, kid.

The beat drops out to prepare the listener for the punch line: "So I went the white boy way of slinging crack rock: I became a stock broker". At this moment the volume of the music is raised, other instruments have joined the drums and bass, and we hear a roar of shouting voices. Simultaneously, a bus speeds past the trees on the previously quiet road. Inside the bus, we watch a rowdy group of white men stand in the aisles gambling and drinking.

This monologue introduces many of the disparate threads that help the narrative pull together the images of white stockbrokers, the sounds of hip-hop, and the logic that puts them all in the same movie. The mention of Notorious BIG (also known as Biggie Smalls) in the above monologue puts hip-hop within the story-world of the narrative. How much money secretaries from Microsoft make and what Biggie Smalls has to say about making money are equally important on Seth's radar. The idea that Smalls is a black artist or hip-hop in a genre that is associated with black people has little to do with Seth's interest in them.

Hip-hop and Smalls are important to Seth as parts of American popular culture. Nevertheless, their blackness does register with Seth and is brought to the audience's attention via negation. Through naming the job of trading stocks as a "white boy way" of selling drugs, Seth also demonstrates that he (and by extension, the film's narrative) thinks of selling drugs as a "black boy" job. The blackness comes in as an opposite for Seth's whiteness but it also comes in with Notorious BIG as a black artist and as a hip-hop artist. Blackness and hip-hop are linked through the invoked presence of Notorious BIG and continue to be linked throughout the film. The score and the soundtrack are linked because the other sonic cues prepare the listener to hear *more* hip-hop. However, these two sonic references to the *idea* of hip-hop are linked to the narrative by the narrative itself. As we move from identifying the music as hip-hop to identifying it as *black*, however, the task involves more than a definition or naming of aesthetics.

When identifying music as black, we often begin with how the artist who created it identifies or is identified. The Angel does not identify herself or her work racially in any of the many interviews and articles

on her that I have consulted. An image alone would not tell us how she identifies, but for some recording artists photographs serve as an index to the culture and community beyond the music. For the Angel, whose promotional photographs are often set against a cityscape, the setting and her clothing point to an urban community. Views of her body, however, tend to be obscured. Her photographs are often taken from a distance, or her back is turned, or she is wearing glasses that cover her face.

While the effect of racially and ethically demarcated cultures on the production of hip-hop does not have a presence in The Angel's conversations about music, gender is ever-present. In interviews about her presence in electronic music communities, The Angel often remarks or is asked to remark on what it means to work in these communities as a woman. Genevieve Powers asked her: "In many interviews you've expressed your frustration with how women producers are perceived, yet you chose to go by a very feminine, soft name - The Angel - why?" (virginmegamazine.com) She answered:

> I try to stay off the soap box, but journalists love to ask questions about how hard it is for women in the biz. Women producers are marginalized in this business because our industry just isn't that evolved . . .

In another article about women in music, Peter Margasak called The Angel "an even rarer species in hip-hop than the female MC: the female producer". (www.chireader.com) Phil Meadley, of the British online music journal "The Fly", asked The Angel: "Does being a female producer, in what is a very male dominate scene, help or hinder you?" and she answered:

> It's hard to say. Most people see my credits and assume I'm a guy. Those in the know are usually bemused. The stigma is so intense that even when people know what my skills are, there is often still this question mark about whether or not I was just 'the singer' on the project and that's only because I'm a woman . . . That's why I play down the vocal thing so much, because it detracts from what I am most proud

> of - which are my production and technical skills. This is a fact that all women are up against in this business . . . ya gotta work twice as hard to get half as much recognition. There is definitely a bit of an old boys club that exists especially in the DJ world and ultimately - what can I say - it's a dick thang.

The question of the role of gender in the world of electronic music is often raised in articles on and interviews with The Angel. She contends that gender in the music business is less of a concern for her than it is for the journalists who ask her about it. Nevertheless, her descriptions of even the sound of her music are often gendered.

In her discussion of the music, itself, The Angel characterizes hip-hop and her music as masculine. The DVD of *Boiler Room* includes a track of commentary for the composer in addition to the commentary of actor Giovanni Ribisi, Ben Younger (the writer/director), and Jennifer Todd (the film's producer). There, The Angel describes even her own music as "masculine-sounding music". She

continues: "It's not wimpy; it's not girly, and it's not feminine". Later, she says of her work in general: "I don't write girly music".

Through her responses and the questions of interviewers, the music is characterized as male. Discussions of race and ethnicity are absent in The Angel's commentary on the soundtrack and the score of *Boiler Room* as well as in her music elsewhere. Ethnic background and racial politics are not issues that she brings to the forefront and neither do journalists seem to ask her questions about these concerns. One could draw the conclusion that race and ethnicity are simply not relevant issues in the music cultures of which she is a part.

It is believable that on the creative end, gender is a far more contentious issue in the making of music than race or ethnicity. This is specially believable given that The Angel was based for many years in England, where electronic music, dance music, and hip-hop (making and listening) communities are often more multiracial than they are in the United States. The fact that *no one* associated with the film finds it necessary (or even interesting) to address the racial politics surrounding

the music The Angel makes could signify that there are no racial politics or that they matter very little. Another possible conclusion listeners and readers could draw is that interviewers see The Angel and The Angel sees herself as 'matching' the culture and therefore likely to be in line with the racial politics of the music. The non-mention of race and ethnicity in The Angel's discourse around *Boiler Room* in particular seems to function, instead, as a loud silence. In the absence of the creator's commentary on race itself, one must not only read the use of hip-hop to reference blackness, one must also think about what it means that this information is not readily available, is not presented as part of how we should receive the music.

In any case, regardless of what we know or think we know about how an artist identifies racially/ethnically/culturally, the meaning of the sounds she creates may not be so easy to categorize. In other words, even if The Angel were to identify herself as black (or by any other racial or ethnic category) in her statements, it would not necessarily mean that her music would then be understood as black music. Neither would it necessarily mean that her music would be used to

reference blackness. Likewise, even with the music from the soundtrack made by black artists, this fact alone does not mean that the music will always serve to represent blackness. Nonetheless, I argue that the hip-hop in *Boiler Room is* a signifier that references a kind of blackness. The blackness that is the object of this system of reference, however, is not the blackness of the artists who make the songs in the film. It is, rather, a blackness that is given shape by the first words of the film and by the social reception of the whole genre of hip-hop.

The fact that there is absolutely no mention of race or ethnicity in any of the DVD commentary or in the many interviews and articles about music in *Boiler Room* that I have consulted is odd, especially since the reviewers who wrote about the music who did *not* converse with The Angel *do* note the appearance of disjuncture between the images of white people and the sounds of black people in the film.

What The Reviewers Say about Hip-Hop

Some of these reviewers address the whiteness of the characters and the blackness of the music head on. Others show how race is being invoked through the slippage between what Seth actually says and the social meanings of his references. Cynthia Fuchs begins her review of *Boiler Room* with the words: "You might love a film about unspeakably wealthy whiteboy stock traders that opens by quoting Biggie Smalls. Then again, you might hate it. . . ." From here Fuchs goes on to address the misreading the film makes in presenting and siding with Seth's belief that his desire to get rich quick is comparable to the desire to escape poverty the Biggie Smalls describes in his song "Things Done Changed".

Nevertheless, Fuchs writes, the choice of hip-hop for the soundtrack is not as "ridiculous and disconnected from the action" as it might seem "at first listen" because it "embodies all the desire and frustration that these characters can't imagine how to express":

> From a distance and as a metaphor, hip-hop conveys the characters' self-images, even if they don't know it or articulate it, hip-hop expresses for them the play-acting they're

> doing, thinking all the while that they're for real. And in itself, hip-hop - that most immediate and crucial cultural expression of desire - is here revealed in its several mutations, absorbed and spit back out in marketable mainstream forms, but also real enough, broken down to its sources.

For Fuchs, hip-hop is present in the film as part of the diegesis, even though none of the characters listen to it on screen. Hip-hop represents the play-acting the brokers are doing in part because its brashness and maleness are key elements of the false identities they assume when they sell stocks to unassuming investors. Hip-hop is also able to represent their play-acting because as a cultural expression is it accesses coolness through blackness.

Fuchs does not directly address blackness in her writing on this music choice, but she does not have to do so to make this point. She has already marked the disparity between the Biggie Smalls quote and the "unspeakably wealthy whiteboy stock traders" of the film. Their clothes and slang make the brokers 'cool' to one another, if not to the audience. As such, using hip-hop

as a cool music would not seem "ridiculous and disconnected from the action," as Fuchs writes, even "at first listen". Hip-hop might also be understood as a music form of the city. As *Boiler Room* is a New York film, there is nothing seemingly "ridiculous and disconnected" about using an urban music form to accompany the images of the narrative. The irony of using this music to accompany the images in this film is about race.

Other reviewers make this line between black sounds and white images even more visible, sometimes by taking the cue from the opening monologue and running with it. Terry Barr, for example, writes:

> Narrated by Seth (Giovanni Ribisi), the Jewish son of a prominent district judge, the view is that stock-brokering today is for the white man what basketball, running crack houses, and rap music are for black man [sic]—the way to move up and out of the hood . . .

While Seth's monologue mentions selling crack and playing basketball as a reference point, it does not directly

connect either activity to black men. The monologue only mentions selling crack as a way to "get out of the ghetto". Although Notorious B. I. G. is mentioned and he is a black man and a rapper, Seth's monologue does not directly address rap music as belonging to black men. In fact, the monologue does not address rap music at all.

Terry Barr's reading, however, connects the dots between Seth's quoting hip-hop lyrics and his calling his job a "white-boy way of slinging crack". When Barr invokes "basketball, running crack houses, and rap music" as belonging to black men, she does it in a way that assumes that the reader already thinks these ideas are connected. There is nothing ironic about this connection. The only irony is the link Seth Davis makes between white stockbrokers and basketball, running crack houses, rap music, or black men.

Some reviewers focused on the hip-hop as setting the pace for the action of the film, the language and images. For example, The Arizona Daily Star's Gene Armstrong writes that *Boiler Room* is a film in which "[t]he intoxicating quick money of unscrupulous stock hustling meets the jackhammering rhythms of hip-hop music". He also writes of Younger's "hyperactive filmmaking style"

as a way to represent the pace of the boiler room: "The film's editing and Seth's narration even move with the staccato beats of hip-hop".

However, even some writers who mostly thought of hip-hop as a structural device read this choice as saying something about race. Journalist David Edelstein mentions hip-hop as a reference to the editing, but nevertheless discusses the whiteness of the characters in the context of hip-hop. He writes that *Boiler Room* shows "the white yuppie tribe at its most scarily primitive". Wildness, rampant sexuality, and rap music are all part of what makes these men so scary and primitive:

> Twentysomething men in similar suits and haircuts burst through the doors of a Manhattan hotel issuing warlike cries and waving fists full of bills. They're "big swinging dicks": They have rap music in their blood and heads full of hustler patter from David Mamet's Glengarry Glen Ross . . .

The rap music these characters are thought to have "in their blood" is either The Angel's score (during this

scene: a repetitive bass line) or the Notorious B. I. G. lyrics that come to Seth's mind as he's reflecting on an article about Microsoft.

Perhaps it is even scary to find hip-hop in the minds of the film's creators. Calling Younger and film editor Chris Peppe "grandmasters of the jump-cut", Edelstein notes the irony of portraying "white boys" through a visual style that is like or influenced by hip-hop: "They give the action a hard, hip-hop syntax. The picture is told like a rap, and since these white boys talk and act like gangstas (well gangstas out of Mamet), the rhythms of the movie complete them". Edelstein ends up making the point that the rhythms of the music are compatible with the narrative style, but takes a detour through the irony that white boys might "talk and act like gangstas" (which are necessarily black, because these "gangstas out of Mamet" are white) to make his point.

Regardless of how completely these reviewers take Younger's bait that the world of stocks is white and parallel to the black world of crack in the opening monologue, most of them read the choice of music as saying something about race. To use hip-hop only as a

symbolic and solely as a symbol of blackness would be to limit both an understanding of the multiple uses of a vital creative practice and an understanding of a vast field of signifying power. In this case, however, audiences with different investments and motivations for reading the racial significance of hip-hop are noting its presence. The fact that none of the people associated with the film who mention the music in their commentary mention of race therefore reads as a silence around the use of hip-hop as a sonic signifier of blackness rather than an argument that there is no link.

The film's producer, Jennifer Todd, describes the music of *Boiler Room* as "mainly hip-hop, mainly down-tempo, beat-oriented music". The composer, The Angel, describes her contribution to the film's music as "moody, atmospheric, quirky, and just a little bit irksome". Of the theme she says that she wanted "to maintain an ominous tone" and that she wanted "a smooth, sexy bassline that rolls around". These descriptions concern the sound. They do not serve to place the sound in cultural or political context.

For the most part, their descriptions also do not serve to place the sound in any kind of representative

context. In other words, neither Todd nor The Angel is describing the use of hip-hop to represent a kind of person or place here. While The Angel's use of words such as 'sexy' and 'ominous' to describe the music does imply a desire to affect the audiences' mood or response to the film, it does not demonstrate a conscious decision to In the conversation between Jennifer Todd and writer/director Ben Younger that is presented as a commentary track on the *Boiler Room* DVD, however, the two talk briefly about The Angel's score as hip-hop and about what they needed her score to accomplish:

> Younger: While I picked all of the source music from my own collection she [The Angel] had the not enviable job of creating a score that would complement that hip-hop but still do what a score is supposed to do, which is complement the scenes
>
> Todd: . . . and service emotional moments . . .
>
> Younger: Exactly, accentuate dramatic scenes like that where someone is shredding something

> . . . she did a great job of that, an amazing job, which is a really hard thing to do. It didn't sound score-y at all and people . . . have said to me that they really felt like all the music was seamless. They weren't sure what was score and what was source.

Here we learn both that the score was supposed to be accentuating the drama of the scenes (servicing emotional moments) and that it was supposed to be understood as hip-hop, as engaging with (indistinguishable from) the hip-hop of the soundtrack. Part of the meaning of the hip-hop of the soundtrack can be read through Ben Younger's thoughts on different types of hip-hop.

Younger discusses his views on contemporary hip-hop and the ways in which his thoughts on social meaning of hip-hop are connected to his thoughts on the world he portrays in *Boiler Room:*

> In the new D'Angelo CD in the liner notes he[6] talks about how he has no inspiration from modern hip-hop artists because they sort of revere Donald Trump more than they revere Al Green. And that's true and that's a problem. You know if you listen to a lot of like, -- not everything - but a lot of modern rap lyrics it's about getting the money, it's about getting paid and that's exactly what these characters are about, exactly what these brokers are about so it's not even two worlds, it's almost like the same world.

For Younger, hip-hop represents the desire to make money at all costs. He uses another artist's critique of 'modern hip-hop artists' - and their *lyrics* - in order to explain what the music (which appears to be from a different world from the world of the narrative, but isn't for Younger) is doing in the story.

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[6] Younger means D'Angelo here, but the liner notes to which he refers (from D'Angelo's second album, *Voodoo)* were written by the poet Saul Williams.

However, the specific hip-hop artists Younger uses to demonstrate this "getting the money . . . getting paid" personality and *their* lyrics do not represent this idea. The very first artists whose music shows up in the film (De La Soul) were known as the "hippies" of hip-hop. In fact, on their more recent album *Stakes Is High*, De La Soul critiques the same anything-for-the-money attitude that Younger and *Boiler Room* critique. Using their music as a way to show a similarity between the world of young white stockbrokers and hip-hop makes an elision between disparate parts of the genre that connects not on the conceptual level but only through hip-hop aesthetics and black masculinity.

Even Younger is aware that the music he uses to symbolize this kind of brutal capitalism is not the music that espouses this kind of attitude. In his comments on his choice to use hip-hop for the soundtrack, Younger describes the environment in which the real life brokers from boiler room environments live and work. In addition to detailing the way these brokers spend money and sell stock, Younger describes the kind of music they enjoy. He says:

> In reality these stockbrokers who listen to hip hop listen to really mainstream stuff. I wasn't interested in putting that in the film. So I figured I'd stay true to the genre, keep it as hip-hop, but give people something really interesting to listen to. So you've got a lot of classic stuff, you've got a lot of new school stuff, but it's really good. It's underground or it's just a better form of hip-hop.

In this statement, Younger's desire to use "a better form of hip-hop" appears to be a function of his knowledge of and interest in the hip-hop as creative expression. If he intends for his use of hip-hop to be symbolic in *this* statement, it is as a symbol of the "underground" or "better form" (read: "good") kind of music.

The actual music Younger uses as a symbol of good music, however, is the same music he uses to service emotional moments, to accentuate the dramatic elements. It is the same music he uses to characterize the world of the brokers who are all about "getting the money . . . getting paid". Although the music he uses, the specific

songs he uses, are not about getting the money or from artists who symbolize that attitude, Younger uses them to represent this idea. Since the hip-hop music that is associate with frivolous spending that Younger addresses (in his consideration of the critique from D'Angelo's liner notes) is from a different era from the music in *Boiler Room,* it does not even sound alike.

The hip-hop of the late nineties that *is* from a world of desire parallel to that of *Boiler Room* is faster-paced, with more grandiose musical gestures, and the rhyming has a looser relationship to the rhythm. In sound and content, these forms of hip-hop have a different meaning within the context of hip-hop. As forms of creative expression and as political content, these are two different musics with two different meanings. What they have in common is the blackness as an object.

In *Boiler Room* the hip-hop—acousmatic, non-diegetic music—refers to an idea of blackness that is stereotypical because it links a creative practice associated with black people to the ideas of wastefulness, ruthlessness, and violence. The symbolic economy that is used to represent wastefulness, ruthlessness, and violence in American popular culture

commonly references blackness, but we often only recognize these representations when they are visual. In order to recognize that two different kinds of ideas are being held together in the narrative of *Boiler Room*, we have to recognize the work of sonic stereotype. In order to 'see' sonic stereotype, we must recognize that blackness is symbolized not just through visual signs but through sonic signs, that sonic signs can denote objects through context-specific conventions, and that stereotypes can be referenced through (slippery) signifiers that reference many objects. If we can recognize these ways in which sonic stereotypes function, we will be able to recognize both the "strange, sometimes alien, even contradictory" uses to which black sonic signifiers are put and "the experiences that stand behind" the "figures and repertoires on which popular culture draws".

"There's A Crack in Our Voice": Speaking through/against Sonic Stereotype

In order to identify the presence of sonic stereotypes in the last chapter, I discussed the use of black presence in the film *Boiler Room*. The narrative turns in *Boiler Room* appear to break some of the stereotypes associated with whiteness and the profession of selling stock; however it makes these breaks by relying on stereotypes of blackness communicated through sound. The previous chapter ("Is The Audience Listening?") discusses the ways in which recent developments in film sound theory can help us identify sonic stereotypes associated with blackness in narratives like *Boiler Room*. It is my argument that the use of sonic stereotypes in films like *Boiler Room*, for which the filmmaker and most of the characters are white, affects the ways in which black artists who wish to distance themselves from stereotype communicate through and with black sounds.

In "Regular Verbs", for example, an aural performance by poet and audio artist Pamela Z, the speaker tells a story about auditioning for the part of a "tough black woman". The text of the piece explores the

idea of stereotypes regarding the sound and image of a black woman. The performance marks a distinction between the voices of two black women in order to break from stereotype. However, Pamela Z speaks both against and through stereotype in order to think about the meaning of a black voice (her own) apart from stereotypes of black voices.

"Regular Verbs" is part of a larger performance project entitled *Parts of Speech*. As a whole, that project explores identity through language. In "Regular Verbs", the project directly confronts the idea of stereotype as a way of engaging with a black woman's voice, her own. In this piece, Z begins to tell a story in a tone reminiscent of a comedian (or teacher): "This is a really true story. Sometimes I do voiceovers to make extra money and one time I had this audition for a voiceover. . . ." Z goes on to describe the experience of being told that she was (1) "not right" for the part for which she auditioned - a corporate CD-Rom project - and (2) "just perfect" for another part. As the person making these evaluations offered no more information about the project, Z explains, she (or the character she is playing) is left with the curiosity:

> . . . "What is it? What's the part?" And he said: "Oh, you know, it's, it's a tough for a tough black woman". And I thought: *Tough black woman? I've never done a tough black woman. I'm not sure if I know how.* "Will I have to speak Ebonics?" And he said: "Listen, I'm sure you're perfect for the part, you're very talented. I know you can do it. . . . Well I wondered what he meant by *very talented*. I wonder what he heard in my voice that made him think I'd be good at this . . .

As the piece continues, Z's story takes a turn from "really true" to "almost fantastic". In order to prepare for her "tough black woman" performance, Z's character goes down to her local college bookstore in search of Berlitz tapes. Among the tapes for Yiddish, French, and Double-Dutch, she finds tapes entitled *Yo, Whassup? An Introduction to Ebonics*.

Introduced by a computer voice, the tapes begin with conjugation. The guide's voice (performed by vocalist

Jennifer Ross) leads Z's character through the verb "to be":

I is *You is* *Girlfriend is*
I is You is Girlfriend is

He, she, or it is
He, she, or it is

At first, Z's character is comforted by the seeming ease with which she is catching the hang of Ebonics. Finding the language "pretty consistent", she moves on to the helping verbs. This time, she is still able to follow the Ebonics guide, but is not able to do so without laughing:

I be talkin *You be talkin* *She be talkin*
I be talkin You be talkin She be talkin

We be talkin *You be talkin*
We be talkin You be talkin

Chiiile they be talkin
(laughter)

mMM Why you laughin at me?
Ok. Sorry. I'm sorry

Z's character finds it even more difficult to follow the program once the tape moves to "Negative Exclamations" (such as "Ooo don't be dissin me!" "Chile, naw!" and "Chile, is you crazy?!) and "Miscellaneous Phrases" (such

as "Wassup blood, wassup?" and "You bet' not mess with Mr. Charley; he watchin' you!")

Realizing that learning this language might require more attention than she originally supposed, Z's character decides to forward through the tape to the section designed to meet her immediate need: "Tough Black Woman Exercises". In this section, the guide speaks faster than ever and in long phrases. Z's character finds it hard to keep up:

> *I just handle my business the way I handle my business*
> I just handle my business the way I . . .
>
> *I wouldn't take that if I was you. You gone take that?*
> Uh . . . du—
>
> *. . . None of it. I mean, I saw that girl last week and her hair was unh. Right here. And blonde. Blonde, what's that about? Bitch, I'll hurt you. I mean, who the hell he think he is talkin' to me that way?*

Completely flustered, Z's character does not attempt to repeat this string of phrases. Aside from the feat of memory it would require to be able to follow the Ebonics guide through the Tough Black Woman Exercises, there are

a number of other differences between Z's voice and the voice of the Ebonics guide. Most of these differences can be noticed throughout the performance of the exercises, but they are especially pronounced at this point in the piece.

The differences between the voices are in authority, accent, texture, and tone. The authority of the Ebonics guide's voice is due in part to the order in which they speak. The guide's voice is always first; Pamela Z's voice is always second. Part of the difference in the live performance is that the guide's voice is a recorded sample. The sample is triggered via BodySynth, an instrument that allows a user (in this case, Pamela Z) to play the sounds by the use of gestures during her performance.

Although Z controls the recorded samples, the authority of that other voice is established through its primacy. Both the fact that Jennifer Ross' voice is recorded and the fact that it is playing the role of a recorded voice give her performance an authoritative role in the piece. Z's voice plays the role of the live (present tense) voice. Therefore, even in situations where both (Ross' and Z's) voices are recorded (such as

in the documentation of live performances), it is only Ross' voice that gains an authority through the idea of recording.

The authority of the Ebonics guide's voice is also established through the confidence with which she makes her statements. When she says "I be talkin' . . ." she pauses a bit before moving on to "You be talkin'", but this pause is by no means a hesitation. The pause is only present to allow the listener to repeat the phrase. When Z's character says, "I be talkin'" however, she says the words more slowly and tentatively, as if they make a question. Each syllable takes its own space, as if "talkin'" means so little to the speaker that it might as well be "tall kin".

I have been referring to the differences in performance as differences of confidence but these differences in confidence might be considered a matter of accent. If one were to describe the differences in accent across the board, one might describe the Ebonics guide's accent as one in which vowels are elongated (i.e.: the 'i's become 'ah's and the 'ar' in Charley becomes Chahley) and the endings of words are sometimes dropped (ie: talking becomes talkin'). Z's character's accent is

one in which might be characterized by the rounding out of vowels (such that 'i' sounds like 'iy') and the consonants are always pronounced. In the pronunciation of phrases during the exercises, however, this accent is somewhere between the two. In other words, in order to perform the tough Black woman (or speak Ebonics), Z's character will have to take on a foreign accent as well as a foreign vocabulary, tone, and syntax.

One of the differences between the Ebonics guide's voice and Z's character's voice that Z's character does not attempt to imitate is voice texture. The Ebonics guide's voice is sandy, gruff; she sounds like a smoker. Her voice is deeper than Z's character's voice. Z's character has a voice that is higher-pitched and smoother. However, the smoothness of her voice is mostly notable in relation to the Ebonics guide. In other words, her voice texture might be characterized differently when listened to alongside different voices.

Most important for our purposes, Z's character's voice texture does not change between telling the story (to the audience for the live performance) and practicing Ebonics (in response to the recorded voice, for herself). Although one might read voice texture as an area of

meaning in the performance of the Tough Black Woman exercises (or other Ebonics exercises), it is not part of what is represented as mutable in the voice. Perhaps that is because one cannot change the voice texture; perhaps it is because voice texture is not considered an important part of the articulation. However, it is also possible that voice texture is a place where a fundamental difference is being represented between the two black women's voices—one belonging to a woman who can play 'tough' and the other belonging to a woman who cannot.

The final area of difference in the voices is in tone. If voice texture is represented as immutable in "Regular Verbs", then tone takes a place on the other end of the performance spectrum. While Z's character's voice never quite matches the Ebonics guide's voice, in the moments where she matches most consistently, the successes are most often about tone. In the beginning, when Z's character is practicing the conjugation of the verb "to be", both characters' tones are mostly imitative of language classrooms.

As I implied earlier, the tone of the guide's voice often sounds confident where Z's character's voice sounds

tentative. Nevertheless, the pauses between words and inflections of syllables in each voice are consistent with their counterparts in language tape guides and students in language labs. As the project goes on, however, tone becomes an increasingly important part of the meaning of each utterance. In order to perform it correctly, Z's character must (and does) achieve the same tone as the Ebonics guide. When she repeats the negative exclamations, for example, Z's character performs the exact tone of the Ebonics guide for phrases such as "Ooo don't be dissin me" and "Chiiile, maybe" and "Chile you lyintome". Even though the voices' textures and accents are different, the tones are the same. This sameness is part of what underscores the differences in the other areas. By the end of the performance, the sounds have become completely abstracted from the narrative.

Using the BodySynth, Z continues to trigger vocal samples of Jennifer Ross. By this time the samples are no longer of words, but only of the meaningful, nonlinguistic sounds which carry judgments and values, even in the absence of the sentence:

oo mmmm mmm mmm m-mmm uh mm hmm oo

oo mm mmm mmm mmm oo mm hmm oo

mmm *mmm* *mmhm* *oo oooo* *ooo* *ah*
mm mm mmhm oo ah
ah

Although Z's voice still follows Ross' voice, there no longer seems to be a hierarchy between the two. With the absence of narrative, the distinction between the voices no longer seems funny. Even the symbolic function of their unchanging vocal textures seems to evaporate. Ross' deeper, sandier voice no longer seems to mean "tough" and Z's higher, smoother voice no longer seems to mean "not tough".

The call and response between the characters becomes more of a duet than teacher-student relationship.

Pamela Z's choice to make music out of attempts to sound like an Other (who is also a same) is one response to the question Toni Morrison asks but does not answer in *Playing in the Dark*: "What happens to the writerly imagination of the black author who is at some level *always* conscious of representing one's own race to a race of readers that understands itself to be "universal" or race-free?" In fact, when "Regular Verbs" was exhibited as an audio work in the Race in Digital Space exhibition,

Z's statement showed Z's concern with the problem of being "read" by readers who understand themselves to be "universal" or "race-free":

> [T]he incident typified a lot of the manifestations of confusion that people have around physical "race" and cultural "race" and the connections between the two. In a world where being white and male are considered the "regular unflavored" version of being a human, there are a lot of deep-seated stereotypes attached to being or even having the outward appearance of being anything other.

Both Morrison and Z are concerned with the fact that a claim to universality on the part of white "readers" gives way to the projection of stereotypes onto the (work of) black artists. There is one place in which Z's concerns and Morrison's concerns might be said to diverge, however. Morrison is asking a question about *writerly* imaginations. If we consider "writerly imaginations" to refer to creative process of the minds that create stories, then Pamela Z's "Regular Verbs"

could be understood as the creation of her "writerly imagination".

However, if we read Morrison's term as a reference to the mind of a person who writes or (to be more specific) of a person whose work is experienced as writing, then this project cannot be an answer to the question. After all, in the case of "Regular Verbs" Z's method of confronting the challenge of "readers" who assume themselves to be universal, who then project a notion of a static, uncomplicated idea of a black woman onto her and her voice is not necessarily "writerly". Her method is to push beyond words, even beyond representation. Z's choice and ability to make music in response to the "simplification of [her] character in an arrested, fixated form" may be considered outside the scope of a "writerly imagination".

Because many people believe that print (as "a cold technology") will always fail to accurately represent the sounds of speech and music, as Stephen Henderson argues, the challenges of audio artists and those of a writer may differ, even when the stereotypes they confront are sonic. I contend, however, that the stereotypes that live in sound do make their way into writerly discourse. The

idea of sonic stereotype also emerges in conversations about the anxieties many black writers have around the attempts to write about sounds associated with black culture.

In addition to whatever challenges might arise when representing black people, I believe that part of the struggle of invoking sounds associated with black culture(s) in print is that in the translation of sound across media, there is the loss of accent, of stress, of tone. So much of how meaning is made through sound is left up to the imagination or accessed through another device, such as metaphor, simile, and vocabulary. I will demonstrate this practice through a reading focused on the sounds invoked in Cornelius Eady's poem cycle *Brutal Imagination*.

These poems center on the stereotypes of black masculinity that enabled a woman in South Carolina (Susan Smith) to claim that a black man had kidnapped her children and stolen her car. This black man, who does not exist except as Susan Smith's invention, is the speaker of Cornelius Eady's poems. I will argue that Eady deliberately invokes sonic stereotypes as a way to break through Susan Smith's dehumanizing narrative. This is an

important move because sonic stereotypes collaborate with the visual ones and are often used to make different points.

In the move from aural media to print, however, we will need to heighten our focus on the figurative. For in order to 'see' the sound effects of stereotype in print literature, we will have to remember that stereotype involves reading symbolic links as iconic, taking a convention for a trace. When we remember that what we hear (understand) when we listen to stereotype is not activated by actual sonic vibrations, we will find that the point is not to listen to the sound but to understand the sign.

Case in Point: *Brutal Imagination*

In 1994, a woman named Susan Smith reported to the Union, South Carolina police that her two children had been kidnapped by a black man wearing a knit cap. The man, who had intended to steal only her car, was to have told Smith that he did not have time for her to take the children out of the car. The search for the missing children and the black man made national news. A number

of black men were arrested as suspects in Union. After nine days of searching, it was revealed that Smith had pushed her car into a lake with her two children inside. Smith had invented the story about the black male kidnapper/carjacker in order to cover up her own crime. Once Smith's lie was revealed, that story, too, resonated throughout the United States. The response was due in part to the fact that Smith's pleas for her children's safe return had gripped the nation. As her story unraveled, people learned that things were not as they seemed. However, the story also continued to hold the interest of so many because it revealed several troubling facts about the real life consequences of stereotype.

It was troubling that Smith had been able to come up with the idea of a decidedly black and male, but otherwise non-descript, person as the believable form which her imaginary attacker would take. She either invented this character through careful plotting or she made him up on the spot. Either way, she tapped into a cultural mythology that was very much alive and dangerously potent. Actually existing black men were questioned and sometimes detained in relation to the case. Other black people in Union reported that they were

approached with suspicion. Although Smith's guilt was discovered before anyone was convicted, it was her intent for someone else - a black, male, innocent someone else - to pay for her crime. Given the support and sympathy she received, it was more likely than not that that was exactly what would have happened.

It is also disturbing that Susan Smith's lie was so readily accepted by her audience. The police believed her story enough to question and detain suspects. Of course, these same officers eventually found out the truth, to their credit. However, they were not her only audience. Belief among citizens (of Union and beyond) was so great that many people claimed to have seen the black man described, en route with two white children. The disturbing nature of this situation has yielded the production of *Brutal Imagination*, a poem cycle and play that ask the question: If the black man Susan Smith invented existed for the nine days that her story was believed, what would he have said? The author, Cornelius Eady, gives the man a name (Mr. Zero), a personality, and concerns for real people. *Brutal Imagination* is the name of the poem cycle, the book in which the poems appear, and the play based on the book. In this writing, *Brutal*

Imagination will refer to the poem cycle unless the discussion specifically relates to the play.

There are thirty poems in the cycle. While it might be said to have a narrative arc, the story is not linear. Some poems describe the speaker-his impossible physique, his intentions and concerns. Some describe his author, Susan Smith. Other poems analyze the situation: the world is looking for a black man who does not exist while the murderer is the woman they pity. Still other poems contain the opinions of other invented black voices, including Stepin Fetchit and Uncle Tom.

The cycle is about stereotype in that it confronts the assumptions at stake in Susan Smith's story. It is also 'about' stereotype in that it connects this individual instance with other mythic black figures that resonate within US American culture. But where does sound come in? *Brutal Imagination* has an extremely visual narrative. People are *looking* for Michael and Alex, Susan Smith's children. They are *looking* for a black man who has the characteristics of the man in the police sketch. Black men who *look like* this generic image are detained for questioning. In fact, the visual description of

Smith's children's alleged abductor is the means by which 'we' (the intended audience of Smith's story) learn that he is black.

The invocation of sound in *Brutal Imagination* is subtle and, it might be argued, necessarily secondary to the images portrayed. I write "necessarily secondary" in part because Eady's visual descriptions are often responses to Smith's visual descriptions and the police sketch based on her report. Eady's sonic descriptions, on the other hand, do not seem to be in conversation with Smith's testimony. The sounds in *Brutal Imagination* might also be thought to be secondary to its images because there are far fewer moments in which sounds play a part than those in which images play a part. Nevertheless, these sounds hold vital information about the sonic construction of racial stereotypes.

I argue that through reading the invocations of sound in *Brutal Imagination* against one another, against the descriptions of images in the text, and against uses of sound as markers of blackness in other texts, readers can come to a greater understanding of the materials out of which materials are made. Ultimately, this argument depends on the notion that there is an archive of *ideas*

about black sound that can be understood. These ideas can be engaged with even beyond media that offer the ability to hear and evaluate actual sonic vibrations. Because stereotype is a matter of concepts and not of specific materials, literary audiences can "read" the sounds of print texts as well as they can the sounds of texts that are formally audio-specific.

To explain this possibility in further detail I discuss *Brutal Imagination* at length below, offering a close reading of the invocations of sound. Following that discussion, I read the sounds against the images. I place my conclusions about the sonic stereotypes addressed in *Brutal Imagination* against my conclusions about sonic stereotypes invoked in Ben Younger's movie *Boiler Room* and in "Regular Verbs" from Pamela Z's performance piece *Parts of Speech*. The chapter (and thus the dissertation) ends with a proposition for the reading of sound in literary studies.

The Structure of *Brutal Imagination*:

The poem cycle is divided into four sections. The first section sets the scene and is introduced with the following words, which appear in italics above the first

poem: "The speaker is the young black man Susan Smith claimed kidnapped her children" (5). Below are three poems from that section:

How I Got Born

Though it's common belief
That Susan Smith willed me alive
At the moment
Her babies sank into the lake

When called, I come.
My job is to get things done.
I am piecemeal.
I make my living by taking things.

So now a mother needs me clothed
In hand-me-downs
And a knit cap.

Whatever.
We arrive, bereaved
On a stranger's step
Baby, they weep,
Poor child.

My Face

If you are caught
In my part of town
After dark,
You are not lost;
You are abandoned.

All the neighbors will tell
Your kin
Is that you should
Have known better.

All they will do
Is nod their heads.
They will feel sorry
For you,

But rules are rules,
And when you were
Of a certain age
Someone pointed
A finger
In the wrong direction

And said:
All they do
Is fuck and drink
All they're good for
Ain't worth a shit.

You recall me now
To the police artist.
It wasn't really my face
That stared back that day,
But it was that look.

Susan Smith's Police Report

My shape came from out-of-nowhere.
The way some things don't belong
That's the way

I clanged up to the car
Trapped by a badly timed light.
Her poor kids never saw our image

Swell in the rearview mirror.
I was the danger of bulk; fast,
Nervous fingers

Barked the unlocked door open
And in I flooded, all the heartache
A lonely stretch of road can give.

Then she was alone, blinking in
The sign of an indifferent moon
Above the pines.

This, she swore, was the sound
Of my voice.

Charles Stuart in the Hospital

Susan Smith now knows what
Charles Stuart knew in Boston:
We do quick, but sloppy work.
All these details:

How tall was I? The police asked Charles,
And ask Susan,
But I vary; I seem smaller and taller
After dusk.
What was the sound of my voice?
Did I growl like a hound as I waved
The pistol in their face?
Was I as desperate as a teenaged boy,
Horny for a sweetheart's kiss?

Here's what I told Susan:
"I won't harm your kids."
But if the moment was mine,
Why would I say that?

I sit with her at the station
The way I sat with Charles
At the hospital:
A shadow on the water glass,
Changing hues,
The slant of my nose and eyes.
Depending on the light
And the question.

Charles rocks in bed with the bullet
We gave ourselves.
How far away was I? We never stopped
To think.
We were in a hurry.
In Boston and South Carolina
I was hungry for a car
And didn't much care how I got it.
Deadly impatient, Charles tells the cops,
But if I couldn't be seen,
But why would I do it that way?
Why do wives and children seem to attract me?

I sat with Charles the way I sit
With Susan; like anyone, and no one,
Changing clothes,
Putting on and taking off ski caps,
Curling and relaxing my hair,
Trying hard to become sense.

The second section consists of poems in the voices of other stereotypical black characters, including Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima's do-rag. The characters comment on Mr. Zero and his situation. Below are two poems from that section:

Uncle Tom in Heaven

My name is mud; let's get that out
Of the way first. I am not a child.
I was made to believe that God
Kept notes, ran a tab on the blows,
So many on one cheek, so many on
The other.

I watch another black man pour from a
White woman's head. I fear
He'll live the way I did, a brute,
A flimsy ghost of an idea. Both
Of us groomed to go only so far.

That was my duty. I'm well aware
Of what I've become; a name
Children use to separate themselves
On a playground. It doesn't matter
To know I'm someone else's lie,

Anything human can slip, and that's enough
To make grown men worry about
Their accent, where their ambition might
Stray. It doesn't help anything to tell you
I was built to be a hammer,
A war cry. Like him, nobody knew me,

But in my prime, I filled the streets, worried
Into the eardrum, scared up thoughts
Of laws and guns. How I would love
Not to be dubious.

But I am a question whole races spend

Their time trying to answer. My author
Believed in God, and being denied the
Power to hate her,

I watch another black man roam the land,
Dull in his invented hide.

Jemima's Do-Rag

I crown the secret, the hair
The world seems to dread.
At night, alone, after work has loosened
Its grip, and the muscles of her smile
Can relax, at the dresser, beside the
Washbasin, down comes the beauty
They try so hard to bind.

I hear there's a man on the street,
Eyes dead as marbles, dodging
The law. They saw his cap is made
Of wool. If he sleeps, I bet he dreams
Like we do, scalp uncoiled, nobody's helper,
No one's aunt.

In the third section, Susan Smith's story begins to unravel. The poems deal with the nature of the unraveling, but at this point Smith and Mr. Zero seem most entwined:

The Unsigned Confession of Mr. Zero

No car, no road, no tires, no hands, no fingers, no feet,
No gas pedal, no turn signals, no stoplights, no watch cap,
No legs, no pants, no worn shirt, no blank eyes,
No heavy lids, no cold voice, no threat, no dark skin,

No lying in wait, no click of a handle, no mother's scream,
No silence at her questions, no height, no weight,
No strange needs, no sense of adventure, no breath,
No nappy hair, no memories, no one to impress,

No hunger, no shit, no piss, no weariness, no reaction,
No family, no ideas, no history, no favorite song,
No blood pressure, no guilt, no sleep or dreams,
No steering wheel, no rearview mirror, no ID.

Somewhere near the bushes. On the periphery.
A noise you' can't easily locate. I am the heaviness
The sheriff thinks he detects on Susan Smith's tongue.
The story she tries to hold between her teeth and gums.

What the Sheriff Suspects

Each time the town tells the sheriff
To look harder, my nose straightens and
My hair uncurls. I rustle like wind upon
The surface of the lake. I wink just
Below Susan's cheeks.

The sheriff has shuffled my deck all week.
So many miles, so many deeds.
I do not tire. I can't stop driving. I can
Wrangle kids in broad daylight and never
Be seen or heard. I'm not doing this for ransom.
When I'm about, things simply don't add up,

A short distance becomes too large, clocks run amok,
Stop signs change into traffic lights. Now he wonders
Why he's never noticed the way Susan's body can't sit still,
My accent rising from her alibi.

Next of Kin

The black man in town
They thought looked like me,
Without the dreamed-up cap
And wardrobe,

The police have him now.
He sits in a small room.
They turn him this way
And that.

He'll cool there for hours.
How do you think he feels?
I whisper *we're innocent*
Into his ears.

He looks so much like me,
We could be brothers.
Already, folks
May have their doubts:

He's poor enough.
Where has he been?
He has his needs.
What do they know?

Neighbors call him *quiet*,
A new knot of stress
On the tongue.

It's been a hard week
To be black in Union, S.C.,
A black woman tells a reporter,

The whites aren't civil.
They look at you and then
Reach over and lock
Their doors.

Now he is it.
Susan has lent me
His cheekbones,
His gait.

For a while,
He is as close as
They'll ever get.

Press Conference

And this is my life now.
I am a faint hum behind the sensation, the blur of doubt
At the corner of the flashbulb.
These are my names these days:
Hungry, senseless, man of little
Schooling, ninny, fraidy-cat.

If I had an opinion, I guess
I would tell you all I'm tired,
Days and days of near misses,
Almost snapping into focus,

The in-between feel of circling
These streets, a rumor.
If I could, I'd let our weariness
Bite into the sheriff's ear.

Susan steps to the mike.
How do we feel?
There's a crack in our voice.

SOUND IN BRUTAL IMAGINATION

Of the thirty poems that comprise the poem cycle *Brutal Imagination*, seventeen of them include a reference to sound. The sound takes many different forms. The most common reference is to the voice; the next is noise. The least common invocation of sound in these poems is to silence. Each of these categories of sound takes a different character in its symbolic life.

Sound in *Brutal Imagination*

In most scholarship on the sounds in literature, the references are to the sounds the words would make were they to be read aloud. Such readings take note of onomatopoeia, consonance, assonance, and rhythm. Stephen Henderson writes of "Black speech and Black music" as the poetic references that make Black poetry "most distinctly and effectively *Black*" in *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (30). When he writes of these sonic references, he conceives of them as influences on the style of the poem, the "techniques and timbres" of forms of oratory and the structure of musical forms (31). Although the essay in which Henderson makes this argument allows for a broader concept of the use of Black speech and Black music in poetry, one in which the *idea* of the voice or of music is as vital as the imitation of it, his writing on theme and saturation does not reference sound in particular.

In a recent monograph by a former United States Poet Laureate, Robert Pinksy explores the use of sound in poetry. Pinksy, too, is mostly concerned with the means of invoking sounds in written poetry. He suggests ways of approaching the construction of a poem's rhythm through

attention to words' duration (such that "ought" take a different amount of time to say than "awed" or "odd") and accent, as well as syntax. He also explores the use of like and unlike sounds to create rhyme. All of these discussions imply an awareness of the voice as a final destination for the poem, but not necessarily as an idea invoked by the poem. Pinsky's approach is very similar to that of Garret Stewart, whose study of sound in *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* considers the formal techniques of William Shakespeare, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf among others.

Meanwhile, Charles Bernstein's anthology on sound and poetry (*Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*) includes articles by authors with diverse views on the matter. Most either address the written poem as a kind of score for a poem to be interpreted sonically later or the analysis of poetry presented through a reading. However, Bernstein does address the idea of sound in the introduction, where he argues that "[c]lose listenings" of poetry sometimes "contradict 'readings' of poems that are based exclusively on the printed text and that ignore the poets' own performances, the 'total

sound' of the work, and the relation of sound to semantics (4).

When these writers mention the reading aloud of poetry, it is often argued that the sounds of poetry read aloud are determined by what is written the page, which acts as a kind of score. This way of thinking about sound in the text is limiting. It does not take into account all of the other ways in which sound might play a part in the interpretation of the text.

First of all, when it comes to reading literature aloud, there are a number of different factors to the sound. In addition to the sounds that the choosing and ordering of words imply, there are the sounds that the reader brings to the reading—the accents and tones and textures of the readers voice and those that the reader projects upon the characters. With *Brutal Imagination*, for example, I have heard the words intoned in the voices of three people who attempted to achieve quite different affects.

I have heard Cornelius Eady read different portions of the cycle on four separate occasions: (1) in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan in June of 2000, (2) in New York City in October 2001, (3) in Detroit, Michigan in

June of 2001, and (4) in Bloomfield Hills, MI in June of 2002. In each of these readings, Eady's voice was breathy, full of pauses where there would not usually be any. He moved his head from side to side as he read. Alongside the words, this performance was a bit eerie. Having also heard him read other poems, I was able to draw the conclusion that the eeriness of these readings was not a product of any peculiarity on the part of Eady's, but rather, a conscious choice about how to represent - through sound - a character that does not exist, even in the story world.

In the play that was made of the cycle, the same words are split between two characters - Mr. Zero and Susan Smith. In the performance I attended at the Vineyard Theater in New York in December of 2001, Joe Morton performed Mr. Zero and Sally Murphy played Susan Smith. Murphy's Susan Smith approached most words with hesitation and fear, but when the language told of her determination, her voice intoned the words with surprising strength. As does the real Susan Smith, Murphy's Smith has a slight Southern accent and a youthful tone that accent the idea that her choices have

thrust her into a set of circumstances that are out of her control.

Joe Morton's portrayal of Mr. Zero cannot be measured against a real Mr. Zero, as he does not exist. Nevertheless, Zero has a realistic tone in Morton's voice, none of the awkward pauses or impossible breathiness he has in Eady's voice. In Morton's performance, Zero's voice carries a judgment in the tone which can be heard in the first poem: "So now a mother needs me in a knit cap and . . . *What*ever. . . ." This Zero's 'whatever' is a comment on the ridiculous nature of the job he is to perform. However, when Eady reads this poem, the stress is on the second syllable: "What*ev*er". In Eady's readings, Zero's tone implies that it does not matter to him how he is to appear or what he is to do.

Part of the difference between the play *Brutal Imagination* and Cornelius Eady's readings is that when Eady reads, all of the words are always performed in one voice (Eady's). In the play, however, some of the words are presented in Morton's deep, direct, sarcastic voice; some are presented in Murphy's higher-pitched, Southern, tentative voice; and some are presented in both voices at

once. While Eady must rely on an unconventional reading tone to convey Mr. Zero's difference from an actual black man in his readings, the play establishes this estrangement effect by doubling the voice.

This is but one of many possible ways to read the sounds of *Brutal Imagination*. Though the sounds of the performance of the poem cycle and play are of great interest to me, the readings of sound I have made so far have led my study in another direction. In my discussions of the use of sonic stereotypes in Ben Younger's film *Boiler Room* and Pamela Z's audio piece "Regular Verbs", I presented an argument that the particular sounds used in each of those projects held meaning in certain cultural contexts. These particular sounds, I argued, function in culture in such a way that when used in narratives, they access notions of toughness, wastefulness, and danger by invoking the presence of black people.

Without losing attention to these particular sounds, I believe it is possible to trace this kind of argument to the reading of print literature as well. In the case with images, the stereotype is not a function of looking alone, but rather, of a discourse deployed through images. Such is the case with sonic stereotypes as well.

It is not what we hear that makes the sonic stereotype. It is, rather, the way in which we "read" sound, the way our everyday narratives of race are constructed and delivered through sound.

If it is the case the discourse is what activates the sonic stereotype more than the sound itself, then it stands to reason that this discourse washes over into any medium in which sounds are invoked. With this idea in mind, I present close readings of the sounds in *Brutal Imagination*. This text is particularly useful for my project mostly because it is about stereotype. It is also useful because although sound is invoked often throughout the text, *Brutal Imagination* is not *about* sound consciously. The sounds mentioned are tools for representing other ideas.

There are thirty poems that comprise the poem cycle *Brutal Imagination;* seventeen of them include a reference to sound. In many of these pieces, the reference to sound occurs in the final moment of the poem. This method of writing produces the effect of resonance. At the end of these poems, the reader is left with the idea of a sound. As she moves to the next poem, the sound is still "in the air", conceptually. In order to think about the work of

concepts associated with sound, it will be helpful for us to read the invocations of sound according to category.

There are three different categories of sound invoked in *Brutal Imagination*. The most common reference is to the voice. This may be because Mr. Zero's voice was one of the first ways through which Eady imagined the character. The idea for the poem cycle was born with the novelist Chuck Watchel asked Eady what it would mean if the man Susan Smith invented actually had existed for the nine days that people were searching for him. Before Eady decided to write the poem cycle, he sat with the idea, and voice was one of the ideas that came first and often: "I kept thinking about things like what shoes does he wear, and what's the sound of his voice," he told Samantha Storey, "and what does it actually feel like to be in that predicament". In the same moment that Eady imagines an image for the walking stereotype, he imagines a voice for the talking stereotype.

This voice has a life in the cycle that results. Voice, however, is not the only sonic means through which Mr. Zero is characterized. The next most common sonic reference is noise. Although noise does not appear as often in these poems, references to noise nevertheless

accent the rest of the text in ways that are instructive for our thinking on sonic stereotypes. The least common category of sound invoked in these poems is silence. Silence is not often understood as a kind of sound. As I argue later in this chapter, however, silence should be thought of as a category of sound against which other categories are measured.

Of the four main categories into which sound is divided, the only one not referenced in *Brutal Imagination* is music. Music is, however, a vital part of Eady's creative practice. Eady once named "music" as part of his "agenda" as a poet, one of three recurring ideas (along with "family" and "the experience of being an African-American in this culture") in his work. In an interview with Samantha Storey he says that music has always been "a companion in [his] work". He also said about music that when he listens to a very good musician, he feels as if he is hearing their stories. "That has always fascinated me," he says, "I try to find a way to translate or interpret what I hear in music" (1). Elsewhere, in a discussion about a particular work of his entitled "Thelonius Monk", Eady gives more details about the nature of this translation of musical sound into

print literature. He describes his desire in that poem to imitate the rhythm in Monk's music as well as the hard sounds.

When this discussion with poet and teacher Daniel Kane opens up to music in general, Eady says: "Music can be politics, fashion, socialization, lifestyle, or religion in a sense. There are all sorts of things that revolve around music". Eady has a place for music as generally symbolic, then, but in his own work, music often figures either as the mood of the poem or as a kind of syntax through which a story be told. It is perhaps for this reason that music is not present in *Brutal Imagination*. If music for Eady is a symbol of culture (such as community or ethnic or national pleasure) or a formal logic, then it is perhaps not a fitting means through which to represent the sounds of a reduced character *in his work*.

The remaining categories of sound—voice, silence, and noise—take on different characters in their respective symbolic lives. Finally, there is a category of sound that is sometimes symbolic, and always meaningful in its invocation, but entirely dependent upon the reading for meaning. These sounds could be voices,

noises, or silences; in the absence of the sounds themselves, Eady's rendering leaves them open. I will argue that this kind of invocation is particular to print narratives.

VOICE

First let us consider voice as a symbol. In an article on "voice", Peter Elbow lists a number of ways in which the concept plays out in writing. Among the meanings this term references are ideas about actual sounds readers imagine, but there are also metaphorical readings of "voice" that will be useful to our reading. Elbow argues that in writing, "voice" may reference the sound a reader imagines as an author's actual speaking voice or the voice of a character. "Voice" may also be used to reference and author's **distinctive patterns** of writing, a writer or speaker's **authority** to communicate in a given setting, or **expressions of sincerity**, which Elbow calls "resonant voice" (16). Each of these ways of thinking about "voice" is actually a reference to communication and the ways in which a speaker (of any sort) is recognized by his or her audience.

When Cornelius Eady began to consider writing a cycle of poems in the voice that became Mr. Zero's, the question "What's the sound of his voice?" was among the first he asked himself. Because the face was a given, the voice had to be created - or perhaps remembered, borrowed from the representation of another stereotype. In *Brutal Imagination*, the voice is mentioned in moments of uncertainty, often as a way to pin down the character when he becomes too abstract.

In "Susan Smith's Police Report" readers are given the Smith character's account of the invented kidnapping through Mr. Zero's 'voice': "My shape came from out-of-nowhere," "I was the danger of bulk", "in I flooded" all place the action in first person (12). Although this poem mostly references the actions Mr. Zero was supposed to have made, it ends on voice as his vehicle for communication: "Then she was alone, blinking in/ The sight of an indifferent moon / Above the pines.// This, she swore, was the sound/ Of my voice". Mr. Zero's "this" can be read as a reference to an absent description, which was in the police report. It could also be understood as Mr. Zero's distinctive style of communicating, which, because he is not real (even in

this story he tells in his own voice), was created by the Smith character.

In "The Lake", Mr. Zero asks two questions about his own elusive presence. The first is about appearance and the second is about sound. He asks: "Ever look someone/ You know / Straight in the eye // And have them look / Right through you?" (14) This question he poses as a fugitive, getting away with something, though he has done nothing. His voice is often plural in this poem because he 'is' both the stereotype of a black man and its architect (this time, a white woman). He is also the lie, itself, invisible for nine days, though in almost plain sight. Then Zero repeats the question with a different spin: "Ever try to say/ Something,/ And know what you said/ Slid past an ear?" (15) The voice, here, is presented as a way in which the story might be found out, just as the image is. In this case, however, it is no matter. The story is not discovered yet.

In "Charles Stuart in the Hospital" the voice comes in as a question that is asked of both Charles Stuart and Susan Smith: "What was the tone of my voice?/ Did I growl like a hound as I waved/ The pistol in their face?" (22) In "Uncle Tom in Heaven" the voice in question is not

Zero's, but Uncle Tom's. Speaking about himself, about the way he is used among children and adults alike to separate one type of black person from another. Uncle Tom says: "Anything human can slip, and that's enough/ To make grown men worry about/ Their accent". (27) Here the voice is again a means through which a truth may be communicated or found out. It holds a story.

In "What the Sheriff Suspects", the Smith character's story begins to unravel. Zero's hair uncurls and his nose straightens as the sheriff concentrates on the case. As he pays closer attention to Susan Smith, Mr. Zero says that his accent rises "from her alibi" (38). Again, image and voice are referenced as qualities through which Mr. Zero's blackness can function as a shield for the Smith character. As his accent is lifted from the story Smith tells, she can be found out as the perpetrator of the crime.

The voice returns in "Press Conference", where Mr. Zero thinks about the strange life he has as the Smith character attends a press conference. Tired of the charade, Zero declares that he would like to end it. For most of the poem he speaks in first person singular, as if watching Susan Smith from a distance. Once Smith

speaks at the press conference, however, they become merged again: "Susan steps to the mike./ How do we feel?/ There's a crack in our voice". This "crack" is both a literal reference and a metaphor.

Pre-confession, the crack in Susan Smith's voice might have been read as a sign of the fear and stress under which she spoke. Post-confession, of course, this crack also seems to reveal the lie. The crack in the voice is therefore an opening through which the truth can be found out. Because Zero is included in this speaking, however, this crack can also be read as a cracking in two, a distancing of Susan Smith from Mr. Zero. As the cycle continues, the crack between the Susan Smith character as victim and the Susan Smith character as perpetrator opens wider.

SILENCE

In many ways, silence is the most difficult category of sound to identify. When listening to sound vibrations, the moment we attend to the sound of silence is the moment in which its identity (as silence) is most contentious. The common understanding of silence is that

it is the absence of sound, but silence is, instead, a cultural value. Silence is often found when people are in the absence of objectionable or preferable sounds. When it is the absence of objectionable sound that defines silence, the silence is a valued kind of sound. People who desire to escape the sounds of the city, for example, might identify the woods as silent or quiet. All of the sounds of the forest are of no matter (in the matter of silence, at least) because they are not hearing the sounds they do not want to hear.

When silence is defined by the absence of preferable sounds, however, the silence is a devalued sound. For people for whom the sounds of the city are comforting, for example, the woods may also be identified as silent or quiet. In this case, however, the silence is a bad thing. It becomes too quiet. None of the many sounds of the forest will comfort such people.

In either case, silence is defined in the negative. Silence is present when certain sounds cannot be heard. Although there may be other sounds present, what matters for the identification of silence is the absenting of particular sounds. Composer John Cage once stated that sound was nothing more than "all of the sound we don't

intend" (in Kahn, 163). Arguing that there was no such thing as absolute silence, he declared that silence could therefore include loud sounds as well as quiet sounds. His musical compositions often involved creating silences in the music—moments in which the performer would not make sounds or, in the case of his piece 4'33, entire compositions of no sound. The point was to allow audiences to attend to the kinds of sound that nevertheless existed in the room.

Responding to Cage's formulation, a writer named Kate Callaghan extended this discussion to consider the cultural contexts in which some sounds are intended or expect and others are ignored in an essay called "Some Thoughts on Voice and Modes of Listening". She writes:

> As a city dweller, silence requires my removal from day-to-day life, which is full of ambient industrial noise. The bush is silent, a library may be silent, a boat on the harbor, even reading a book in a café may be silent: places where there is undeniably constant sound, but where I can feel momentarily removed or Other to myself.

Connecting sound and hearing with a "bodily position" within both in time and space, Callaghan explores the idea of silence as dependent upon a situation in which sounds matter in hierarchy. Where sounds may be too loud, unheard of, beautiful, or inaudible, Callaghan argues that 'silence' involves the removal of certain sounds and the valorization of others.

In *Brutal Imagination*, silence and quietness are telling absences. They are places where Mr. Zero can be found. In "What I'm Made Of", Zero contemplates the characteristics given him by Susan Smith. "Susan fills my lungs with air," he says, "But what do I breathe out? Parchment, ink, low growls, the/ Blank gap between words" (36). Like the cracked voice, the "blank gap between words" is a space in which the true story can be discovered, but unlike the crack it is also a place where a listener can insert a lie. Mr. Zero is both what the Smith character tells and what can be imagined in her silences.

In "Next of Kin", Mr. Zero tells that the neighbors of the man who is taken in for questioning call him "quiet" (40). Though Zero does not say much else about the sound of this man, 'quiet' is almost enough to

convict him. The things no one knows about this man are the things that make him guilty in the minds of some. "He's poor enough./ Where has he been?/ He has his needs./ What do they know?" Again, this man's story is filled in by the gaps, by the silences.

In "Sympathy", Susan Smith resists confessing to the sheriff, who is trying to coax the story out of her. The poem ends with Zero saying, "I am not for his ears, Susan knows . . . We bob together in the god-awful silence" (47). Silence figures, again, as the unknown, but this time it seems that the sheriff is only waiting until the Smith character will let the story out. The silence is the unknown because it is not known exactly what story will emerge or how, but there are obviously parts of the story missing.

In each case, the mention of silence or quietness is a reference to an act of listening for a sound that is not made. The sheriff is listening for the real kidnapper behind the characteristics Susan Smith gives Mr. Zero. Like crickets in the forest, Mr. Zero is *there*, but only as a shield for Susan Smith. Whatever kind of voice he does have in these moments, it is not the kind of voice

that could reveal anything about the case. As such, it does not register except as "god-awful silence".

NOISE

Noise has one of the strongest symbolic presences in critical conversations about categories of sound. It is second only to music. Of noise, Kate Callaghan writes that noise is identified either on perceptual grounds (because a sound "hurts the ears") or on cultural grounds (because a sound "requires to much effort to hear"). In Douglas Kahn's history of sound in the arts (*Noise Water Meat*), he writes that we can identify sounds as noises because they "exist where they shouldn't or they don't make sense when they should"(21). Noise, he writes, "implies a mutable world through an unruly intrusion of an other, an other that attracts difference, heterogeneity, and productive confusion" (22). In this way noise is like acousmatic sound. Like acousmatic sound, noise may be difficult to locate or it may have an unknown source. It may also be the way through which the

listener identifies displeasing sounds, excessiveness, sounds for which the listener has low or no tolerance.

The noises of *Brutal Imagination* often surround Mr. Zero's actions. He "clang[s] up to the car" and "bark[s] the unlocked door open" in "Susan Smith's Police Report" (12). He "crackle[s] from cell phones and shortwave" in "Where Am I?" (13) In "Stepin Fetchit Reads the Paper", he is said to be "rattling the streets" (32). In "My Eyes" Mr. Zero's dark skin is described as having "[r]ichocheted off [Susan] and her friends on a playground" (44). He emerges as "a faint hum" in "Press Conference" (46). In "The Unsigned Confession of Mr. Zero" he simply *is* "a noise you can't easily locate" (35).

How do these invocations of sound operate as noise in the symbolic register? All of these noises are metallic. The clanging and rattling are sounds that suggest that Mr. Zero is carrying something extra with him. The noisiness with which he moves through the streets or approaches a car indicates that he, too, is excess, something that does not belong. Or perhaps this idea references the irony that he can't be found, his

actions should be so loud and yet he has managed to get away from the scene without notice.

The noise in "My Eyes" is both more direct and more abstract. In this poem Mr. Zero imagines that Susan Smith has the idea to call on him after having seen someone with dark skin as a child. Mr. Zero imagines that this skin "ricocheted" off the Smith character as if it were a bullet. Because the reader can imagine the source of the sound that ricochets (a swift bullet, bouncing off one object to hit another), the representation is more direct than a general clanging. What makes this idea abstract is that skin itself rarely moves, and when it does it hardly moves in such a way as to make a sound. While a person makes sound when he speaks and may also make sound as he moves from place to place, skin is usually thought to be stationary.

In this case, then, it is what the skin incites that makes an impact. With this noise, Eady marks the moment that the Smith character first understands that another (darker) skin could be used as a shield for her own actions. The striking awareness of difference and what that difference means is communicated to the reader through noise precisely because it suggests the movement

of an idea from another representation of a stereotype to the Smith character and her friends. The idea is that there is a difference so extreme that it could stand in for (or shield) unthinkable horrors.

There is yet another noise that is associated with the speaker of *Brutal Imagination*, but it does not underscore movement in the ways these other sounds do. On more than one occasion, Mr. Zero is said to growl. Because a growl is a sound associated with animals, I am reading it as a noise, a non-human sound. In this narrative, however, the growl may also function a kind of voice. In "What I'm Made Of", Mr. Zero lists "low growls" as one of the things he "breathe[s] out" when Susan Smith fills his lungs with air (36). In "Charles Stuart in the Hospital", for example, the growl emerges in place of a human voice. After asking "What was the tone of my voice?" Mr. Zero asks, "Did I growl like a hound as I waved/ The pistol in their face?" (22) As with the other noises, this growl underscores Mr. Zero's movement. Unlike the other noises, however, it is the sound thought to be the sound his body makes. Whereas the sound of Zero clanging up to the car or his rattling the streets could

be the sound of his car or of money or keys in his pockets, the growl is a sound from his mouth.

JUST CAN'T SAY WHAT IT IS

This inability to place the sounds firmly in one category or another fits with the general mode of presentation in *Brutal Imagination*. Because Cornelius Eady's task is to speak through a flawed sign, the representation of Mr. Zero requires the use of many signifiers that cannot be easily categorized. This is also a product of invoking sound in print, however. In print, the sculpted sounds of a text are either usually understood as linguistic signs, where consonance, assonance, and rhythms are arranged to produce a sonically pleasing (or displeasing) reading.

When it comes to the representation of sound, however, invocations depend on finding the word that can communicate a certain sonic quality to the intended audience. This process becomes trickier when it is not just the sound that must be represented, but also an idea associated with it. In the quest for economy of language,

the writer will want a single word to do the work of signaling both the sound and the idea behind it. For a word to do this work may require that it slip between categories.

For example, when Eady has Zero say: "Did I growl like a hound as I waved/ The pistol in their face?", any reader who knows what the word 'growl' means can imagine the sound and what the sound means. Different readers may make slightly different interpretations (i.e.: 'the growl means that Zero is angry' vs. 'the growl means that Zero is barbaric'). The interpretations readers make, however, are likely to be in conversation with other contexts in which they have heard growling or references to growling. The symbolic function of the growls in *Brutal Imagination* will register as noise or voice depending on which context is emphasized in the minds of the readers.

Sometimes these sounds that register as one category of sound or another slip through defined categories because they access sound through metaphor. In "The Unsigned Confession of Mr. Mr. Zero", Mr. Zero is "the heaviness/ The sheriff thinks he detects on Susan Smith's tongue" (35). This sound could be a voice, as what is on one's tongue might be understood as voice, a metaphor for

expression. It could also be read as a silence, because it is just beneath recognition. Finally, the idea that there is some sound, or could be, but it cannot be identified, means we could also read this reference as a noise. However, it may be useful also to recognize that this "heaviness", associated with sound because of the reference to the Smith character's tongue, does not have to be a sound at all.

Stepin Fetchit is the speaker of "Stepin Fetchit Reads the Paper" - not the actor by that name, he makes sure to explain, but the character from the movies. He refers to himself as "the low-pitched anger/ Someone mistook for stupid" (32). What kind of low-pitched sound is anger? Anger could have any kind of sound. Like the "heaviness" of "The Unsigned Confession of Mr. Zero", its abstract form keeps us from being able to categorize the sound. Unlike that "heaviness", however, the "anger" of "Stepin Fetchit Reads the Paper" is definitely given a sound because it is "low-pitched". Readers have to associate this anger with other sounds that can be low-pitched (voices? growls?) or with the sound of the character Stepin Fetchit.

With other sounds of *Brutal Imagination*, however, what is invoked has more to do with the act of listening than it does with the sound itself. For example, in "Where Am I?" Mr. Zero says that he 'crackles' from cell phones and shortwave. Having interpreted this sound as a noise (an excessive sound, a sound whose source is obscured) that marks Zero's movement, we might read the next line ("I am listened for in alleys") as an extension of this noise. When we isolate this line from the line before it, however, we will see that Mr. Zero, as the listened for being, is not associated with any one category of sound. What is it that people expect to hear when they listen for Mr. Zero? Is it noise (a crackle or growl)? Is it a voice, directing children to scurry this way or that? Is this a representation of silence, as a sound expected but not heard? That Zero is "listened for" means that the listeners believe he can be heard, but what kind of sound is being represented here, is not exactly clear.

Other times when Mr. Zero figures as a hearable object, the actual sounds he might make are also absent from the text. In many of these cases, the focus is on the listening ear, the ear that desires to hear more. In

"Press Conference", Zero declares that he is tired and states that if he could he would "let our weariness/ [b]ite into the sheriff's ear". In "Sympathy", he notes that the sheriff is baiting Susan to tell him what has really happened. He says that he will not be revealed to the sheriff because he is not "for his ears". The ear figures again in "The Lake", where Mr. Zero asks the reader "Ever try to say/ [s]omething/ [a]nd know what you said / [s]lid past an ear?" In this poem, which is placed early in the cycle, Eady writes the same idea that the ear does not hear what it might, but the possible sound is more defined.

Eady seems to be representing different kinds of things for the ear to miss. What the ear does not hear in "The Lake" is a story, the "something" someone tried to *say*. In "Press Conference" it is a mood, "our weariness". Meanwhile, in "Sympathy" it is identity that might be heard, only Mr. Zero, himself, is "not for [the sheriff's] ears. Though these seem to be three different kinds of information that one might hear, however, the object is the same. It is not just a black male kidnapper that is the object of Mr. Zero's "I", but rather Susan Smith as the true killer and liar with a black shield. So

it is 'they' who are tired in "Press Conference", that they are a 'they' is the something that slid by an ear in "The Lake", and this same fact is what is not for the sheriff's ears in "Sympathy".

Therefore, Mr. Zero tells the reader about his own noise making in "Confession", it is this unruly truth that is speaking, not a fixed idea of a black man. The last lines of the poem seem to reference a voice: "The Closer // Susan inches me / Toward // This, the / Louder // The sheriff / Hears // Me bitch". If, as I have argued, Zero's references to himself are not references to a person, however, then perhaps he is only referencing the voice as a symbol when he uses language that is undeniably connected to the idea, language such as 'voice', 'tone', 'accent'. Though we could read the reference to volume of Mr. Zero "bitch[ing]" as a portrayal of a character yelling in some sort of voice. But perhaps it is, instead, a truth that is complaining, that truth being the conflation the stereotyped idea of the black man and the actions of Susan Smith.

The final poem of the cycle also ends with a sound that is difficult to categorize. What makes it difficult to categorize this sound is that readers are neither

given a description of the sound nor a definite answer as to who or what has made the sound. All we are given is the response to a sound. In this poem, "Birthing", Cornelius Eady has placed Mr. Zero's statements against words from the real Susan Smith's actual confession. After each moment described by Smith, Zero describes his own formation.

The poem begins in the real Susan Smith's words, "*When I left my home on Tuesday, October 25, I/ Was very emotionally distraught* . . .", which are immediately followed by Zero's words, "I have yet / To breathe". Most of Mr. Zero's statements in "Birthing" are about the timing of his creation, his reinvention as the Smith character's bad man. At one point he says "I am not me yet./ I am just an understanding". At other points the language is similar: "I am not yet opportunity"; "I've yet to be called"; "Susan stares at the sinking. My muscles aren't her muscles". So we know that by the time we reach the end of the poem, we will hear the story of Mr. Zero's birth.

The story is brief: "She only has me/ after she removes/ our hands from our ears". We are left with an image: Susan Smith with her hands over her ears. Perhaps

there is another image, the very next moment, the moment in which she has the idea to invent Mr. Zero. However, there is also a horrific sound left hanging in the air. It could be her screaming or the sound of the car rolling into the lake. It could be any sound; in this text there is no description to give it character. All we know is that the Smith character attempts to avoid hearing it. Whatever it is, it represents the horror of what she has done, the thing that needs covering up.

In a way, this dreadful sound functions as silence, voice, and noise. As a product of the story told in print it is a silence. Although the rest of the text may have prepared the reader to expect some kind of sound, we are not given the tools through which to imagine a definite sound. This makes it too quiet, in a literary sense, to "hear". On the other hand, as a voice this sound conveys meaning. Though the reader cannot "hear" it, it is what communicates to the Smith character that she has done something too horrible to claim. This final invocation of sound functions most powerfully, however, as noise.

Readers do not know how the sound sounds, but we also do not know its source. In the narrative itself, it seems that what is at stake is this unknown source. All

of the possible answers (the children, Smith screaming, the car entering the lake, all of the above) add to the horror of the sound. As the last idea in the poem cycle, the sound that is invoked but not described both uses sound as a medium for a powerful idea and depends on the medium to keep that sound from us.

Conclusion

In Nella Larsen's *Passing*, two white-looking black women eye one another across the Whites-Only rooftop dining room of the Drayton Hotel. One (Clare Kendry) is looking at the other (Irene Redfield) with "intense interest" (149). Because she interprets the look incorrectly, the one being watched becomes nervous. She checks the position of her hat, the placement of her makeup, and the hem of her dress. Irene finally settles upon the idea that it is not what is on her body but her body itself that is the focus of the other woman's gaze.

Despite her own transgression, Irene reads the other woman's body in the context of the Drayton as white. As such, Irene imagines that the intensity of the woman's gaze is an indication that she has been detected as black and will soon be asked to leave the establishment. Clare Kendry's look, however, is a result of trying to place her friend's face. Clare is not looking at Irene as undesirable presence in the space. It is, conversely, that Clare is recognizing Irene as familiar and therefore desirable, as an intimate associate and as a colluder, a fellow black trespasser in this white scene. Clare

crosses the room to greet her friend with the words: "Pardon me, but I think I know you". After a brief exchange in which Irene tells Clare that she is mistaken, Clare presses the issue: "'Don't tell me you're not Irene Westover. Or do they still call you 'Rene?'" (150) Once she hails Irene in this way ("'Rene"), Clare reveals something about her own identity that is not read on the face - her relationship to Irene and the context for it. Irene does figure it out eventually, but at first she is confounded by the unlikely pairing of the sound "'Rene" with the image of the woman standing before her. Clare's two ways of hailing Irene ("Irene Westover" and "'Rene") enable Irene to place their connection in time (before Irene's marriage) and location (Chicago) with another type of relationship (familiar, more familiar than Irene would have shared with a white acquaintance).

This conundrum sends Irene searching for the context in which the woman standing before her could have come to hail her. Larsen writes:

> . . . Irene tried vainly to recall when and where this woman could have known her. High school? College? Y.W.C.A. committees? What white girls had

> she known well enough to have been familiarly addressed as 'Rene by them . . . Irene studied the woman beside her for some clue to her identity. Who could she be? Where and when had they met? (151)

Irene thinks she is scanning her life for the answer, but within each context (high school, college, the Y.W.C.A) is another, raced context. Irene is limiting the group of people who could be this woman; she is asking herself where and when a white woman could have learned this way of sounding her name. The riddle is impossible. The answer is "nowhere". In the telling of Irene's thought process through Larsen's words, Irene Redfield does not come to see Clare's identity; she comes to hear it.

Larsen shows us the dawning of Irene's immediate sensory information, her way of placing a person from her past, and the persistence of her memory:

> . . . Irene felt that she was just about to remember [the woman beside her]. For about the woman was some quality, an intangible something, too vague to define, too remote to seize, but which was, to Irene Redfield, very familiar. And that voice. Surely

> she'd heard those husky tones somewhere before. Perhaps before tone, contact, or something had been at them, making them into a voice remotely suggesting England. Ah! Could it have been in Europe that they met? 'Rene. No (151).

Irene realizes that her eyes are failing her, that the thing that seems familiar about the woman before her is "intangible", "vague". It seems as if Larsen is about to call it "invisible". As a result, Irene begins to change her method; she begins to search with her ears. Larsen portrays this movement from the failure of placing Clare's image in context to the successful method of placing her sounds as a slip, a lucky accident.

First, the something "about the woman" beside her seems "intangible" and "too vague" to Irene, then it becomes "familiar". The sound is brought in, not as an addition to these thoughts but as an interruption of them. The words "And that voice" start in mid-sentence. The idea of the woman's voice seems to rush in with the idea of the familiar. Then come Irene's thoughts about how she (or one) recognizes a person through sound (moving from the general idea of "voice" and all its

accoutrements to a more specific category of "tones" - husky) and how a person changes over a lifetime (as encounters and desires - in the form of people, places, and affect - get "at" one's defining qualities). Larsen writes Irene as flustered: "'Perhaps', Irene began, 'you—'" Irene's self-interruption, a stutter, is a representation of her doubt. She knows that it is through listening that she will be able to place the woman beside her, but she does not know whether to trust her premonition. Then comes clarity as Clare comes into view (as Irene's black friend.)

What convinces her is the sound that follows, Clare's laugh:

> The woman laughed, a lovely laugh, a small sequence of notes that was like a trill and also like the ringing of a delicate bell fashioned of a precious metal, a tinkling.
>
> Irene drew a quick sharp breath. "Clare!" she exclaimed, "not really Clare Kendry?" (151)

Clare's laugh, specifically its tones, finally (and fully) reveal what her speech began to betray, what her face does not.

This scene is usually read as a moment in which we learn about characters through their gaze. The scene is about looking for me, as well, but mostly because it demonstrates what looking alone does not allow us to "see" - both the emotional relationship between people, that which cannot be 'detected', and the ways of recognizing cultural or community connections through other senses, such as hearing. But how does hearing work in this moment between Clare and Irene? Is Irene listening to the way Clare says "'Rene" as a kind of slang, as a word to be understood as distinct from "Irene"? Is "'Rene" a matter of accent, a way of pronouncing the word "Irene"? Or is "'Rene" Larsen's way of getting at tone? I ask these questions because while all of these ways of saying a name may have meaning within a community (slang, pronunciation, and tone), they function in somewhat different ways.

Slang is perhaps the most self-conscious form of identifying in-group communication through speech. As a repertoire of in-group new terminology and secret double

meanings, slang functions as a marker of difference from the speakers of the standard speech and the users of other slangs. As a racial marker, slang functions to make a group distinct from other groups by way of a chosen speech pattern, invoked for the very purpose of showing difference, a shared difference.

Accent is also a strong, clear way of marking through speech a group's difference from speakers who use standard pronunciations of words (or the standards privileged by a particular text or context) and speakers who speak with other accents. Accent comes into the speech of a speaker more as a result of cultural background than for any reason in the present. It reflects the setting where one was raised and/or the location of one's formative years. As such, it seems to have less to do with a conscious choice to identify with a group and more to do with a natural(ized) convention, a habit of talking. Through accent, a group's difference is marked as a kind of difference which can't be helped, especially when used to signify racial difference.

Tone, on the other hand, at least in English, is subtler than both slang and accent. In-group intonation could 'appear' in print as a form of slang or accent, as

a mater of choice or cultural disposition. In a text in a medium that has sound (such as radio or film, for example) tonal emphasis may be used to mark group difference from other groups, but it may also be used to emphasize an individual's relationship to a topic or scene.

In print media it is difficult to invoke tonal shifts without making them appear to be shifts in accent or slang or without drawing more attention to the saying of a word than tonal shifts actually draw when heard. A tonal shift could be portrayed in print through italics, through bold letters or underlined words, or through changes in orthography. Sometimes tonal shifts are implied by the context. In these cases, reading tone requires the creative listening of the reader. This kind of delicate line cannot (or perhaps should not) be dealt with in a heavy-handed way because to emphasize tone too strongly in this case would be to change the meaning of the conversation. Italicizing a word might make the reader hear a force in the saying that would cross the delicate line being walked in the conversation. As such, the slow unfolding of wit revealed through a balanced dose of macho posturing, insult, and respect is what

marks words and not the altered appearance of those words on the page. The reader must bring an intimate sense, an ability and willingness to read into the text, and - if possible - a memory of listening to the context.

These are the tools I bring to my reading of Clare's "'Rene". "'Rene" could be a way of accessing an idea of slang. If we take "'Rene" for a word in itself it would mean that there was a word "'Rene" that was distinct from the word "Irene". If we were to read "'Rene" in this way, we would understand that Irene is being invoked as black, bourgeois, from a certain place, and of a certain age. Most importantly for our purposes, Irene is being read *by* someone from a black, middle class world from that same time and place. If we read "'Rene" as a way of marking Clare's accent, on the other hand, it would have to be an accent that Irene also shared, but sometimes suppressed.

Both women are black and from the same middle class community. What would it mean for Irene to pronounce her name "Irene" if her accent were to sometimes make her call herself "'Rene"? Such a shift could mean that part of one's past were being hidden, which is certainly at work in the moment Clare and Irene are sharing at the Drayton. "'Rene" is part of her black life. It would not

be ridiculous to imagine that to read "Irene" as a way of pronouncing the name that accompanies Irene Redfield when she is passing for white. This reading doesn't hold, however, as Irene is also hailed as "Irene" among other black communities. Neither does it hold that "Rene" is simply some accent of Clare's alone, as Irene recognizes this way of saying her name that belongs to a time and place and people, as one way she is invoked by a group.

While it is certainly possible that we are to take "'Rene" as slang, as a part of the vocabulary particular to a community, I read this way of writing the sound Clare makes of Irene's name as a tonal distinction. I read it this way because Irene knows she recognizes this way of being called as belonging to another time and place and people, but she doesn't have the kind of immediate recognition that slang might produce. This voicing is subtle in the way that tone is subtle. She can recognize who does not call her in that way, but it takes a moment for her to remember who does call her in that way. I also read it as tone, however, because I am reading my own experience into this scene.

I read the language use as a matter of tone in part because I find myself listening to and for tone when I am

speaking to a person who looks white but may be black. I am most conscious, however, of my own ways of using voice to reveal my black identity to those who can't see me (say, over the phone) or those who can't see what my relationship to black people is. Sometimes I may let word usage and accent slip into a more group-specific language or accent while speaking to a person to whom I want to out myself as black. Most often, though, it is a range of sounds which is altered when speaking. It is not quite as accidental as accent, nor is it as strong, as easy to detect as a change in accent. Tone shifts are also not always as deliberate or informal as the word choice of slang. A change in tone is something I find myself in the middle of making before I realize that I am reaching out to another person, asking to be recognized as part of a community. Why does this happen?

My own tone shifts in conversation with black people do not necessarily come in the form of raised or lowered pitch. They are, rather, towards a more varied range, a willingness to mix higher highs with lower lows. I do not know whether this range reflects an assumption about black tones or whether this range reflects a personal preference for the range, a comfort in the speaking that

enables that preferable way of speaking. I imagine that my range of tones in those situations is a matter of both things happening: the comfort of being around people who I think will recognize the sound patterns I make (and like to make) introduces a reason for me to make them.

The role of recognition, or the possibility for it, is crucial. It means that no matter how broadly one thinks of the "blackness" being heard or performed, it is bound to a community. Though I associate the range of sounds to which I refer with a Diasporic community from West Africa, though I have heard it (or something like it) in the speech of people in or from England, the Dominican Republic, and Senegal (for example), I am most struck when I hear it in the voice of an English speaking US American from Tennessee, middle Tennessee, to be exact. Those are the sounds that coax out of me my more comfortable speech, more personal community sounds. The ones I tend to reserve for family and intimate friends. The closer I get to home, the closer I get to sounding like it. However, getting close to home is complicated because I am not technically from Nashville in the way that most Southerners are from their towns.

I was not born there and my parents are not from there. They are from Pittsburgh (where the O in Ronnie is pronounced long) and Winding Gulf, West Virginia (where people say things like "up 'ar" for "up there"). Other people in my family are from Newark, New Jersey (where people say things like "thowaht" for "thought") and Umuoji, Nigeria (where the elision of syllables is such that the word "musician" sounds more like the word "mission" to my ears), and indeed, Nashville, where the sounds are most familiar to me, even though I often don't even sound like them. I do not pronounce "coach" as a two syllable word, for example, and even what I do sometimes say like (black) Nashvillians (such as "y'all" and "I'm finna" or "I'm finta" in place of "I'm fixing to" [which means "I am going to"]) are new to my speak. I can remember a time when I not only did not speak in these ways, but also did not exactly understand them.

This identification of the sounds of 'home' or 'my people', then, is uneasy and uneven. This realization only makes it more striking to me, then, that 1) I do hear similarities in tone across the different words and accents (of the different peoples I call mine) and 2) that people who speak in many different languages,

accents, and tones (to which I nevertheless feel related) invoke in me the desire to break from the reserved tones I use with those from whom I feel distant into the more varied tones of my comfortable speech. The ways of speaking which spark this change cross national, linguistic, and sometimes even racial borders, but always signify some kind of home.

Interestingly, I have found that I use the same tones to accomplish different kinds of communication. Depending on the context, the same tones can mean: "You can't see me (we are on the phone), but I am black. I am your people, so treat me right" or "I know you find something about me suspect, but I know how to act, so don't be on guard with me" or "Something about you is suspect, so how will you respond to my shift in tone? Will you back away? Will you change tones with me? How will you sound? Will your tone shifts move to parody or will they make me feel at home?" It shocks me to hear myself make this tonal shift in some situations. Sometimes these tones simply mean "I am one of you" and so they can mean "I am Southern" as easily as they can mean "I am black". Sometimes, however, it is not a matter of comfort. It is, rather, a matter of protection.

Clare's voice, then, is the "field" of investigation for Irene, not because she "thinks" that the voice is how one might place a person from one's past, but rather, because it strikes a nerve for her. The husky tones are familiar. Are they husky because black? Husky because sensual? Does Irene (or does author Nella Larsen) conflate the two? They make Irene aware of other sounds of (in) the voice - England, for example, but an England that entered the voice post-husky tones. The voice is also familiar because of what it says: "Or do they still call you 'Rene'?" Whether it is tone, pronunciation, or accent that gives "'Rene" its distinctive quality - or all three - we know that it is something about the saying of the name that communicates to Irene that the speaker knows her.

My interest in this moment has to do with the way that the medium at once clarifies some ideas about race and friendship (as organizing principles of community) and/or some memories about one's particular past in that it pins down a spelling. I am also interested, however, in the way that print opens up different possibilities for interpretation in this moment. If we were to read the source of theses sounds (the husky tones and the voiced

sound "'Rene" as acousmatized, we could become more aware of how the narrative moved through subtler inflections on a number of levels.

There is the kind of acousmatic sound that operates (as it does in film) within a scene such that a character can hear a sound but not where the sound is coming from. The most common manifestation of this kind of acousmatic sound is the proverbial thing that goes bump in the night. What is it? Where is it? These are the kinds of questions that propel a narrative in which such a sound appears. In film, voice may also be acousmatized when it is extra-diegetic, such as in voice-over narration. The voice-over narrates. These uses of voice may not even appear as "voice" in print counterparts. For example, the voice-over narration in *Blade Runner* (the version which has voice-over, because one of them does not) appears as "thought" (or a kind of internal dialogue) in the book from which it is adapted (Phillip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) In the film we see the source in that we see Harrison Ford as Decker when we hear Decker's thoughts, but we don't see him making the sounds. We may understand this as a function of the fact that voice is not ultimately at stake, but what does the

voice signal, then? Is it only a by-product of the necessity of getting these thoughts into the audience's minds? Perspective? Memory?

These questions about the function of represented sounds lead me to the future of my inquiry. Stereotype, after all, is a kind of familiarity, a relationship to memory, albeit a distorted one. Stereotypes that are utilized in narratives add to this kind of familiarity the familiarity of genre and medium. My future research will add to the study of medium by tracing specific invocations and representations of sound across media and by locating the raced expectations that accompany them.

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BIOGRAPHY

Mendi Dessalines Shirley Lewis Townsend Obadike was born in Palo Alto, California on October 17 of 1973. She graduated summa cum laude from Spelman College with a major in English and a minor in Spanish in 1995. Obadike is the author of a book of poetry, *Armor and Flesh* (Lotus Press), and the libretto for an Internet opera, *The Sour Thunder* (Bridge Records). She has published the "MUSIC" entry in *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia* and a review of Latasha Natasha Diggs' poetry album *Television*. The following articles and interviews are forthcoming: entries "TOI DERRICOTTE" and "HARRYETTE MULLEN" in *The Feminist Encyclopedia of African-American Literature,* "These Are The Breaks: Experiments in Black Poetry" in *Black Issues Book Review*, a review of the song cycle *In What Language?* by Michael Ladd and Vijay Iyer in *Black Issues Book Review*, and an interview entitled "Freaking the Machine" in *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Arts and Culture*. Obadike is also a widely published poet.

Mendi Obadike recently curated the first online exhibition for Rhizome New Media Archive this year with her husband and collaborative partner, Keith Obadike. The show was a sound art exhibition entitled *Ya Heard: Sounds from*

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